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• THE

BELTON ESTATE.

BY

ANTHONY TROLLOPE,

AUTHOR OF

"CAN YOU FORGIVE HER?" "ORLEY FARM," "FRAMLEY PARSONAGE," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE BELTON ESTATE.



CHAPTER I.

MISS AMEDROZ RETURNS HOME.

CLARA was to start by a train leaving Perivale at eight on the following morning, and therefore there was not much time for conversation before she went. During the night she had endeavoured so to school herself as to banish from her breast all feelings of anger against her lover, and of regret as regarded herself. Probably, as she told herself, she had made more of what he had said than he had intended that she should do; and then, was it not natural that he should think much of his

mother, and feel anxious as to the way in which she might receive his wife? As to that feeling of anger on her own part, she did get quit of it;—but the regret was not to be so easily removed. It was not only what Captain Aylmer had said about his mother that clung to her, doing much to quench her joy; but there had been a coldness in his tone to her throughout the evening which she recognised almost unconsciously, and which made her heart heavy in spite of the joy which she repeatedly told herself ought to be her own. And she also felt,—though she was not clearly aware that she did so,—that his manner towards her had become less affectionate, less like that of a lover, since the honest tale she had told him of her own early love for him. She should have been less honest, and more discreet; less bold, and more like in her words to the ordinary run of women. She had known this as she was packing last night, and she told herself that it was so as she was dressing on this her last morning at Perivale. That frankness of hers had not been successful,

and she regretted that she had not imposed on herself some little reticence,—or even a little of that coy pretence of indifference which is so often used by ladies when they are wooed. She had been boldly honest, and had found her honesty to be bad policy. She thought, at least, that she had found its policy to be bad. Whether in truth it may not have been very good,—have been the best policy in the world,—tending to give her the first true intimation which she had ever yet received of the real character of the man who was now so much to her,—that is altogether another question.

But it was clearly her duty to make the best of her present circumstances, and she went down-stairs with a smiling face and with pleasant words on her tongue. When she entered the breakfast-room Captain Aylmer was there; but Martha was there also, and her pleasant words were received indifferently in the presence of the servant. When the old woman was gone, Captain Aylmer assumed a grave face, and began a serious little speech which he had prepared. But he broke down

in the utterance of it, and was saying things very different from what he had intended before he had completed it.

“Clara,” he began, “what occurred between us yesterday is a source of great satisfaction to me.”

“I am glad of that, Frederick,” said she, trying to be a little less serious than her lover.

“Of very great satisfaction,” he continued; “and I cannot but think that we were justified by the circumstances of our position in forgetting for a time the sad solemnity of the occasion. When I remember that it was but the day before yesterday that I followed my dear old aunt to the grave, I am astonished to think that yesterday I should have made an offer of marriage.”

What could be the good of his talking in this strain? Clara, too, had had her own misgivings on the same subject,—little qualms of conscience that had come to her as she remembered her old friend in the silent watches of the night; but such thoughts were for the silent watches, and not for open expression in

the broad daylight. But he had paused, and she must say something.

“One’s excuse to oneself is this,—that she would have wished it so.”

“Exactly. She would have wished it. Indeed she did wish it, and therefore——” He paused in what he was saying, and felt himself to be on difficult ground. Her eye was full upon him, and she waited for a moment or two as though expecting that he would finish his words. But as he did not go on, she finished them for him.

“And therefore you sacrificed your own feelings.” Her heart was becoming sore, and she was unable to restrain the utterance of her sarcasm.

“Just so,” said he; “or, rather, not exactly that. I don’t mean that I am sacrificed; for, of course, as I have just now said, nothing as regards myself can be more satisfactory. But yesterday should have been a solemn day to us; and as it was not——”

“I thought it very solemn.”

“What I mean is that I find an excuse in

remembering that I was doing what she asked me to do."

"What she asked you to do, Fred?"

"What I had promised, I mean."

"What you had promised? I did not hear that before." These last words were spoken in a very low voice, but they went direct to Captain Aylmer's ears.

"But you have heard me declare," he said, "that as regards myself nothing could be more satisfactory."

"Fred," she said, "listen to me for a moment. You and I engaged ourselves to each other yesterday as man and wife."

"Of course we did."

"Listen to me, dear Fred. In doing that there was nothing in my mind unbefitting the sadness of the day. Even in death we must think of life, and if it were well for you and me that we should be together, it would surely have been but a foolish ceremony between us to have abstained from telling each other that it would be so because my aunt had died last week. But it may be, and I think it is the

case, that the feelings arising from her death have made us both too precipitate."

"I don't understand how that can be."

"You have been anxious to keep a promise made to her, without considering sufficiently whether in doing so you would secure your own happiness; and I——"

"I don't know about you, but as regards myself I must be considered to be the best judge."

"And I have been too much in a hurry in believing that which I wished to believe."

"What do you mean by all this, Clara?"

"I mean that our engagement shall be at an end;—not necessarily so for always. But that as an engagement binding us both, it shall for the present cease to exist. You shall be again free——"

"But I don't choose to be free."

"When you think of it you will find it best that it should be so. You have performed your promise honestly, even though at a sacrifice to yourself. Luckily for you,—for both of us, I should say,—the full truth has come out; and we can consider quietly what will be best

for us to do, independently of that promise. We will part, therefore, as dear friends, but not as engaged to each other as man and wife."

"But we are engaged, and I will not hear of its being broken."

"A lady's word, Fred, is always the most potential before marriage;—and you must therefore yield to me in this matter. I am sure your judgment will approve of my decision when you think of it. There shall be no engagement between us. I shall consider myself quite free,—free to do as I please altogether; and you, of course, will be free also."

"If you please, of course it must be so."

"I do please, Fred."

"And yesterday, then, is to go for nothing."

"Not exactly. It cannot go for nothing with me. I told you too many of my secrets for that. But nothing that was done or said yesterday is to be held as binding upon either of us."

"And you made up your mind to that last night?"

"It is at any rate made up to that now."

Come,—I shall have to go without my breakfast if I do not eat it at once. Will you have your tea now, or wait and take it comfortably when I am gone?"

Captain Aylmer breakfasted with her, and took her to the station, and saw her off with all possible courtesy and attention, and then he walked back by himself to his own great house in Perivale. Not a word more had been said between him and Clara as to their engagement, and he recognised it as a fact that he was no longer bound to her as her future husband. Indeed, he had no power of not recognising the fact, so decided had been her language, and so imperious her manner. It had been of no avail that he had said that the engagement should stand. She had told him that her voice was to be the more potential, and he had felt that it was so. Well ;—might it not be best for him that it should be so? He had kept his promise to his aunt, and had done all that lay in his power to make Clara Amedroz his wife. If she chose to rebel against her own good fortune simply because he spoke

to her a few words which seemed to him to be fitting, might it not be well for him to take her at her word?

Such were his first thoughts ; but as the day wore on with him, something more generous in his nature came to his aid, and something also that was akin to real love. Now that she was no longer his own, he again felt a desire to have her. Now that there would be again something to be done in winning her, he was again stirred by a man's desire to do that something. He ought not to have told her of the promise. He was aware that what he had said on that point had been dropped by him accidentally, and that Clara's resolution after that had not been unnatural. He would, therefore, give her another chance, and resolved before he went to bed that night that he would allow a fortnight to pass away, and would then write to her, renewing his offer with all the strongest declarations of affection which he would be enabled to make.

Clara on her way home was not well satisfied with herself or with her position. She had had

great joy, during the few hours of joy which had been hers, in thinking of the comfort which her news would give to her father. He would be released from all further trouble on her account by the tidings which she would convey to him,—by the tidings which she had intended to convey to him. But now the story which she would have to tell would by no means be comfortable. She would have to explain to him that her aunt had left no provision for her, and that would be the beginning and the end of her story. As for those conversations about the fifteen hundred pounds,—of them she would say nothing. When she reflected on what had taken place between herself and Captain Aylmer she was more resolved than ever that she would not touch any portion of that money,—or of any money that should come from him. Nor would she tell her father anything of the marriage engagement which had been made on one day and unmade on the next. Why should she add to his distress by showing him what good things might have been hers had she only had

the wit to keep them? No ;—she would tell her father simply of the will, and then comfort him in his affliction as best she might.

As regarded her position with Captain Aylmer, the more she thought of it the more sure she became that everything was over in that quarter. She had, indeed, told him that such need not necessarily be the case,—but this she had done in her desire at the moment to mitigate the apparent authoritativeness of her own decision, rather than with any idea of leaving the matter open for further consideration. She was sure that Captain Aylmer would be glad of a means of escape, and that he would not again place himself in the jeopardy which the promise exacted from him by his aunt had made so nearly fatal to him. And for herself, though she still loved the man,—so loved him that she lay back in the corner of her carriage weeping behind her veil as she thought of what she had lost,—still she would not take him, though he should again press his suit upon her with all the ardour at his command. No, indeed. No man should ever be

made to regard her as a burden imposed upon him by an extorted promise! What;—let a man sacrifice himself to a sense of duty on her behalf! And then she repeated the odious words to herself, till she came to think that it had fallen from his lips and not from her own.

In writing to her father from Perivale, she had merely told him of Mrs. Winterfield's death and of her own intended return. At the Taunton station she met the well-known old fly and the well-known old driver, and was taken home in the accustomed manner. As she drew nearer to Belton the sense of her distress became stronger and stronger, till at last she almost feared to meet her father. What could she say to him when he should repeat to her, as he would be sure to do, his lamentation as to her future poverty?

On arriving at the house she learned that he was up-stairs in his bedroom. He had been ill, the servant said, and though he was not now in bed, he had not come down-stairs. So she ran up to his room, and finding him seated in an old arm-chair by the fire-side, knelt

down at his feet, as she took his hand and asked him as to his health.

“What has Mrs. Winterfield done for you in her will?” These were the first words he spoke to her.

“Never mind about wills now, papa. I want you to tell me of yourself.”

“Nonsense, Clara. Answer my question.”

“Oh, papa, I wish you would not think so much about money for me.”

“Not think about it? Why am I not to think about it? What else have I got to think of? Tell me at once, Clara, what she has done. You ought to have written to me directly the will was made known.”

There was no help for her, and the terrible word must be spoken. “She has left her property to Captain Aylmer, papa; and I must say that I think she is right.”

“You do not mean everything?”

“She has provided for her servants.”

“And has made no provision for you?”

“No, papa.”

“Do you mean to tell me that she has left

you nothing,—absolutely nothing?” The old man’s manner was altogether altered as he asked this question; and there came over his face so unusual a look of energy,—of the energy of anger,—that Clara was frightened, and knew not how to answer him with that tone of authority which she was accustomed to use when she found it necessary to exercise control over him. “Do you mean to say that there is nothing,—nothing?” And as he repeated the question he pushed her away from his knees and stood up with an effort, leaning against the back of his chair.

“Dear papa, do not let this distress you.”

“But is it so? Is there in truth nothing?”

“Nothing, papa, Remember that she was not really my aunt.”

“Nonsense, child;—nonsense! How can you talk such trash to me as that? And then you tell me not to distress myself! I am to know that you will be a beggar in a year or two,—probably in a few months,—and that is not to distress me! She has been a wicked woman!”

“ Oh, papa, do not say that.”

“ A wicked woman. A very wicked woman. It is always so with those who pretend to be more religious than their neighbours. She has been a very wicked woman, alluring you into her house with false hopes.”

“ No, papa;—no; I must contradict you. She had given me no ground for such hope.”

“ I say she had,—even though she may not have made a promise. I say she had. Did not everybody think that you were to have her money ?”

“ I don't know what people may have thought. Nobody has had any right to think about it at all.”

“ That is nonsense, Clara. You know that I expected it;—that you expected it yourself.”

“ No;—no, no !”

“ Clara,—how can you tell me that ?”

“ Papa, I knew that she intended to leave me nothing. She told me so when I was there in the spring.”

“ She told you so ?”

“ Yes, papa. She told me that Frederic

Aylmer was to have all her property. She explained to me everything that she meant to do, and I thought that she was right.”

“And why was not I told when you came home?”

“Dear papa!”

“Dear papa, indeed. What is the meaning of dear papa? Why have I been deceived?”

“What good could I do by telling you? You could not change it.”

“You have been very undutiful; and as for her, her wickedness and cruelty shock me,—shock me. They do, indeed. That she should have known your position, and had you with her always,—and then have made such a will as that! Quite heartless! She must have been quite heartless.”

Clara now began to find that she must in justice to her aunt's memory tell her father something more. And yet it would be very difficult to tell him anything that would not bring greater affliction upon him, and would not also lead her into deeper trouble. Should it come to pass that her aunt's intention with

reference to the fifteen hundred pounds was mentioned, she would be subjected to an endless persecution as to the duty of accepting that money from Captain Aylmer. But her present feelings would have made her much prefer to beg her bread upon the roads than accept her late lover's generosity. And then again, how could she explain to her father Mrs. Winterfield's mistake about her own position without seeming to accuse her father of having robbed her? But nevertheless she must say something, as Mr. Amedroz continued to apply that epithet of heartless to Mrs. Winterfield, going on with it in a low droning tone, that was more injurious to Clara's ears than the first full energy of his anger. "Heartless,—quite heartless;—shockingly heartless,—shockingly heartless!"

"The truth is, papa," Clara said at last, "that when my aunt told me about her will, she did not know but what I had some adequate provision from my own family."

"Oh, Clara!"

"That is the truth, papa;—for she explained

the whole thing to me. I could not tell her that she was mistaken, and thus ask for her money."

"But she knew everything about that poor wretched boy." And now the father dropped back into his chair, and buried his face in his hands.

When he did this Clara again knelt at his feet. She felt that she had been cruel, and that she had defended her aunt at the cost of her own father. She had, as it were, thrown in his teeth his own imprudence, and twitted him with the injuries which he had done to her. "Papa," she said, "dear papa, do not think about it at all. What is the use? After all, money is not everything. I care nothing for money. If you will only agree to banish the subject altogether, we shall be so comfortable."

"How is it to be banished?"

"At any rate we need not speak of it. Why should we talk on a subject which is simply uncomfortable, and which we cannot mend?"

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!” And now he swayed himself backwards and forwards in his chair, bewailing his own condition and hers, and his past imprudence, while the tears ran down his cheeks. She still knelt there at his feet, looking up into his face with loving, beseeching eyes, praying him to be comforted, and declaring that all would still be well if he would only forget the subject, or, at any rate, cease to speak of it. But still he went on wailing, complaining of his lot as a child complains, and refusing all consolation. “Yes; I know,” said he, “it has all been my fault. But how could I help it? What was I to do?”

“Papa, nobody has said that anything was your fault; nobody has thought so.”

“I never spent anything on myself—never, never; and yet,—and yet,—and yet——!”

“Look at it with more courage, papa. After all, what harm will it be if I should have to go out and earn my own bread like any other young woman. I am not afraid.”

At last he wept himself into an apathetic tranquillity, as though he had at present no

further power for any of the energy of grief; and she left him while she went about the house and learned how things had gone on during her absence. It seemed, from the tidings which the servant gave her, that he had been ill almost since she had been gone. He had, at any rate, chosen to take his meals in his own room, and as far as was remembered, had not once left the house since she had been away. He had on two or three occasions spoken of Mr. Belton, appearing to be anxious for his coming, and asking questions as to the cattle and the work that was still going on about the place; and Clara, when she returned to his room, tried to interest him again about her cousin. But he had in truth been too much distressed by the ill news as to Mrs. Winterfield's will to be able to rally himself, and the evening that was spent up in his room was very comfortless to both of them. Clara had her own sorrows to bear as well as her father's, and could take no pleasant look out into the world of her own circumstances. She had gained her lover merely to lose him, —and had lost him under circumstances that

were very painful to her woman's feeling. Though he had been for one night betrothed to her as her husband, he had never loved her. He had asked her to be his wife simply in fulfilment of a death-bed promise! The more she thought of it the more bitter did the idea of it become to her. And she could not also but think of her cousin. Poor Will! He, at any rate, had loved her, though his eagerness in love had been, as she told herself, but short-lived. As she thought of him, it seemed but the other day that he had been with her up on the rock in the park;—but as she thought of Captain Aylmer, to whom she had become engaged only yesterday, and from whom she had separated herself only that morning, she felt that an eternity of time had passed since she had parted from him.

On the following day, a dull, dark, melancholy day, towards the end of November, she went out to saunter about the park, leaving her father still in his bedroom, and after a while made her way down to the cottage. She found Mrs. Askerton as usual alone in the

little drawing-room, sitting near the window with a book in her hand; but Clara knew at once that her friend had not been reading,—that she had been sitting there looking out upon the clouds, with her mind fixed upon things far away. The general cheerfulness of this woman had often been cause of wonder to Clara, who knew how many of her hours were passed in solitude; but there did occasionally come upon her periods of melancholy in which she was unable to act up to the settled rule of her life, and in which she would confess that the days and weeks and months were too long for her.

“So you are back,” said Mrs. Askerton, as soon as the first greeting was over.”

“Yes; I am back.”

“I supposed you would not stay there long after the funeral.”

“No; what good could I do?”

“And Captain Aylmer is still there, I suppose?”

“I left him at Perivale.”

There was a slight pause, as Mrs. Askerton

hesitated before she asked her next question. "May I be told anything about the will?" she said.

"The weary will! If you knew how I hated the subject you would not ask me. But you must not think I hate it because it has given me nothing."

"Given you nothing?"

"Nothing! . But that does not make me hate it. It is the nature of the subject that is so odious. I have now told you all,—everything that there is to be told, though we were to talk for a week. If you are generous you will not say another word about it."

"But I am so sorry."

"There,—that's it. You won't perceive that the expression of such sorrow is a personal injury to me. I don't want you to be sorry."

"How am I to help it?"

"You need not express it. I don't come pitying you for supposed troubles. You have plenty of money; but if you were so poor that you could eat nothing but cold mutton, I

shouldn't condole with you as to the state of your larder. I should pretend to think that poultry and piecrust were plentiful with you."

"No, you wouldn't, dear ;—not if I were as dear to you as you are to me."

"Well, then, be sorry; and let there be an end of it. Remember how much of all this I must of necessity have to go through with poor papa."

"Ah, yes; I can believe that."

"And he is so far from well. Of course you have not seen him since I have been gone."

"No; we never see him unless he comes up to the gate there." Then there was another pause for a moment. "And what about Captain Aylmer?" asked Mrs. Askerton.

"Well;—what about him?"

"He is the heir now?"

"Yes;—he is the heir."

"And that is all?"

"Yes; that is all. What more should there be? The poor old house at Perivale will be shut up, I suppose."

“I don’t care about the old house much, as it is not to be your house.”

“No ;—it is not to be my house certainly.”

“There were two ways in which it might have become yours.”

“Though there were ten ways, none of those ways have come my way,” said Clara.

“Of course I know that you are so close that though there were anything to tell you would not tell it.”

“I think I would tell you anything that was proper to be told; but now there is nothing proper,—or improper.”

“Was it proper or improper when Mr. Belton made an offer to you,—as I knew he would do, of course; as I told you that he would? Was that so improper that it could not be told?”

Clara was aware that the tell-tale colour in her face at once took from her the possibility of even pretending that the allegation was untrue, and that in any answer she might give she must acknowledge the fact. “I do not think,” she said, “that it is con-

sidered fair to gentlemen to tell such stories as that."

"Then I can only say that the young ladies I have known are generally very unfair."

"But who told you?"

"Who told me? My maid. Of course she got it from yours. Those things are always known."

"Poor Will!"

"Poor Will, indeed. He is coming here again, I hear, almost immediately, and it needn't be 'poor Will' unless you like it. But as for me, I am not going to be an advocate in his favour. I tell you fairly that I did not like what little I saw of poor Will."

"I like him of all things."

"You should teach him to be a little more courteous in his demeanour to ladies; that is all. I will tell you something else, too, about poor Will—but not now. Some other day I will tell you something of your cousin Will."

Clara did not care to ask any questions as to this something that was to be told, and therefore took her leave and went away.

CHAPTER II.

MR. WILLIAM BELTON TAKES A WALK IN THE
COUNTRY.

CLARA AMEDROZ had made one great mistake about her cousin, Will Belton, when she came to the conclusion that she might accept his proffered friendship without any apprehension that the friend would become a lover ; and she made another, equally great, when she convinced herself that his love had been as short-lived as it had been eager. Throughout his journey back to Plaistow, he had thought of nothing else but his love, and had resolved to persevere, telling himself sometimes that he might perhaps be successful, and feeling sure at other times

that he would encounter renewed sorrow and permanent disappointment,—but equally resolved in either mood that he would persevere. Not to persevere in pursuit of any desired object,—let the object be what it might,—was, to his thinking, unmanly, weak, and destructive of self-respect. He would sometimes say of himself, joking with other men, that if he did not succeed in this or that thing, he could never speak to himself again. To no man did he talk of his love in such a strain as this; but there was a woman to whom he spoke of it; and though he could not joke on such a matter, the purport of what he said showed the same feeling. To be finally rejected, and to put up with such rejection, would make him almost contemptible in his own eyes.

This woman was his sister, Mary Belton. Something has been already said of this lady, which the reader may perhaps remember. She was a year or two older than her brother, with whom she always lived, but she had none of those properties of youth which belonged to him in such abundance. She was, indeed, a

poor cripple, unable to walk beyond the limits of her own garden, feeble in health, dwarfed in stature, robbed of all the ordinary enjoyments of life by physical deficiencies, which made even the task of living a burden to her. To eat was a pain, or at best a trouble. Sleep would not comfort her in bed, and weariness during the day made it necessary that the hours passed in bed should be very long. She was one of those whose lot in life drives us to marvel at the inequalities of human destiny, and to inquire curiously within ourselves whether future compensation is to be given.

It is said of those who are small and crooked-backed in their bodies, that their minds are equally cross-grained and their tempers as ungainly as their stature. But no one had ever said this of Mary Belton. Her friends, indeed, were very few in number ; but those who knew her well loved her as they knew her, and there were three or four persons in the world who were ready at all times to swear that she was faultless. It was the great happiness of her life that among those three or four her own

brother was the foremost. Will Belton's love for his sister amounted almost to veneration, and his devotion to her was so great, that in all the affairs of his life he was prepared to make her comfort one of his first considerations. And she, knowing this, had come to fear that she might be an embargo on his prosperity, and a stumbling-block in the way of his success. It had occurred to her that he would have married earlier in life if she had not been, as it were, in his way; and she had threatened him playfully,—for she could be playful,—that she would leave him if he did not soon bring a mistress home to Plaistow Hall. “I will go to uncle Robert,” she had said. Now uncle Robert was the clergyman in Lincolnshire of whom mention has been made, and he was among those two or three who believed in Mary Belton with an implicit faith,—as was also his wife. “I will go to uncle Robert, Will, and then you will be driven to get a wife.”

“If my sister ever leaves my house, whether there be a wife in it or not,” Will had

answered, "I will never put trust in any woman again."

Plaistow Manor-house or Hall was a fine brick mansion, built in the latter days of Tudor house architecture, with many gables and countless high chimneys,—very picturesque to the eye, but not in all respects comfortable as are the modern houses of the well-to-do squirearchy of England. And, indeed, it was subject to certain objectionable characteristics which in some degree justified the scorn which Mr. Amedroz intended to throw upon it when he declared it to be a farmhouse. The gardens belonging to it were large and excellent; but they did not surround it, and allowed the farm appurtenances to come close up to it on two sides. The door which should have been the front door, opening from the largest room in the house, which had been the hall and which was now the kitchen, led directly into the farmyard. From the further end of this farmyard a magnificent avenue of elms stretched across the home pasture down to a hedge which crossed it at the bottom. That there had been

a road through the rows of trees,—or, in other words, that there had in truth been an avenue to the house on that side,—was, of course, certain. But now there was no vestige of such road, and the front entrance to Plaistow Hall was by a little path across the garden from a modern road which had been made to run cruelly near to the house. Such was Plaistow Hall, and such was its mistress. Of the master, the reader, I hope, already knows so much as to need no further description.

As Belton drove himself home from the railway station late on that August night, he made up his mind that he would tell his sister all his story about Clara Amedroz. She had ever wished that he should marry, and now he had made his attempt. Little as had been her opportunity of learning the ways of men and women from experience in society, she had always seemed to him to know exactly what every one should do in every position of life. And she would be tender with him, giving him comfort even if she could not give him hope. Moreover Mary might be trusted with

his secret; for Belton felt, as men always do feel, a great repugnance to have it supposed that his suit to a woman had been rejected. Women, when they have loved in vain, often almost wish that their misfortune should be known. They love to talk about their wounds mystically,—telling their own tales under feigned names, and extracting something of a bitter sweetness out of the sadness of their own romance. But a man, when he has been rejected,—rejected with a finality that is acknowledged by himself, is unwilling to speak or hear a word upon the subject, and would willingly wash the episode out from his heart if it were possible.

But not on that his first night would he begin to speak of Clara Amedroz. He would not let his sister believe that his heart was too full of the subject to allow of his thinking of other matters. Mary was still up, waiting for him when he arrived, with tea, and cream, and fruit ready for him. “Oh, Mary!” he said, “why are you not in bed? You know that I would have come to you up-stairs.” She

excused herself, smiling, declaring that she could not deny herself the pleasure of being with him for half an hour on his first return from his travels. "Of course I want to know what they are like," she said.

"He is a nice-looking old man," said Will, "and she is a nice-looking young woman."

"That is graphic and short, at any rate."

"And he is weak and silly, but she is strong and—and—and——"

"Not silly also, I hope?"

"Anything but that. I should say she is very clever."

"I'm afraid you don't like her, Will."

"Yes, I do."

"Really?"

"Yes; really."

"And did she take your coming well?"

"Very well. I think she is much obliged to me for going."

"And Mr. Amedroz?"

"He liked my coming too,—very much."

"What;—after that cold letter?"

"Yes, indeed. I shall explain it all by

degrees. I have taken a lease of all the land, and I'm to go back at Christmas; and as to the old gentleman,—he'd have me live there altogether if I would."

"Why, Will?"

"Is it not odd? I'm so glad I didn't make up my mind not to go when I got that letter. And yet I don't know." These last words he added slowly, and in a low voice, and Mary at once knew that everything was not quite as it ought to be.

"Is there anything wrong, Will?"

"No, nothing wrong; that is to say, there is nothing to make me regret that I went. I think I did some good to them."

"It was to do good to them that you went there."

"They wanted to have some one near them who could be to them as one of their own family. He is too old,—too much worn out to be capable of managing things; and the people there were, of course, robbing him. I think I have put a stop to that."

"And you are to go again at Christmas?"

“Yes; they can do without me at my uncle’s, and you will be there. I have taken the land, and already bought some of the stock for it, and am going to buy more.”

“I hope you won’t lose money, Will.”

“No;—not ultimately, that is. I shall get the place in good condition, and I shall have paid myself when he goes, in that way, if in no other. Besides, what’s a little money? I owe it to them for robbing her of her inheritance.”

“You do not rob her, Will.”

“It is hard upon her, though.”

“Does she feel it hard?”

“Whatever may be her feelings on such a matter, she is a woman much too proud to show them.”

“I wish I knew whether you liked her or not.”

“I do like her,—I love her better than any one in the world; better even than you, Mary; for I have asked her to be my wife.”

“Oh, Will!”

“And she has refused me. Now you know

the whole of it,—the whole history of what I have done while I have been away.” And he stood up before her, with his thumbs thrust into the arm-holes of his waistcoat, with something serious and almost solemn in his gait, in spite of a smile which played about his mouth.

“Oh, Will!”

“I meant to have told you, of course, Mary, —to have told you everything; but I did not mean to tell it to-night; only it has somehow fallen from me. Out of the full heart the mouth speaks, they say.”

“I never can like her if she refuses your love.”

“Why not? That is unlike you, Mary. Why should she be bound to love me because I love her?”

“Is there any one else, Will?”

“How can I tell? I did not ask her. I would not have asked her for the world, though I would have given the world to know.”

“And she is so very beautiful?”

“Beautiful! It isn't that so much;—

though she is beautiful. But,—but,—I can't tell you why,—but she is the only girl that I ever saw who would suit me for a wife. Oh, dear!"

"My own Will!"

"But I'm not going to keep you up all night, Mary. And I'll tell you something else; I'm not going to break my heart for love. And I'll tell you something else again; I'm not going to give it up yet. I believe I've been a fool. Indeed, I know I've been a fool. I went about it just as if I were buying a horse, and had told the seller that that was my price,—he might take it or leave it. What right had I to suppose that any girl was to be had in that way; much less such a girl as Clara Amedroz?"

"It would have been a great match for her."

"I'm not so sure of that, Mary. Her education has been different from mine, and it may well be that she should marry above me. But I swear I will not speak another word to you to-night. To morrow, if you're well enough, I'll talk to you all day." Soon

after that he did get her to go up to her room, though, of course, he broke that oath of his as to not speaking another word. After that he walked out by moonlight round the house, wandering about the garden and farmyard, and down through the avenue, having in his own mind some pretence of the watchfulness of ownership, but thinking little of his property and much of his love. Here was a thing that he desired with all his heart, but it seemed to be out of his reach,—absolutely out of his reach. He was sick and weary with a feeling of longing, — sick with that covetousness wherewith Ahab coveted the vineyard of Naboth. What was the world to him if he could not have this thing on which he had set his heart? He had told his sister that he would not break his heart; and so much, he did not doubt, would be true. A man or woman with a broken heart was in his estimation a man or woman who should die of love; and he did not look for such a fate as that. But he experienced the palpable misery of a craving emptiness within his breast, and did

believe of himself that he never could again be in comfort unless he could succeed with Clara Amedroz. He stood leaning against one of the trees, striking his hands together, and angry with himself at the weakness which had reduced him to such a state. What could any man be worth who was so little master of himself as he had now become?

After awhile he made his way back through the farmyard, and in at the kitchen door, which he locked and bolted; and then, throwing himself down into a wooden arm-chair which always stood there, in the corner of the huge hearth, he took a short pipe from the mantelpiece, filled it with tobacco, and lighting it almost unconsciously, began to smoke with vehemence. Plaistow Hall was already odious to him, and he longed to be back at Belton, which he had left only that morning. Yes, on that very morning she had brought to him his coffee, looking sweetly into his face,—so sweetly as she ministered to him. And he might then well have said one word more in pleading his suit, if he had

not been too awkward to know what that word should be. And was it not his own awkwardness that had brought him to this state of misery? What right had he to suppose that any girl should fall in love with such a one as he at first sight,—without a moment's notice to her own heart? And then, when he had her there, almost in his arms, why had he let her go without kissing her? It seemed to him now that if he might have once kissed her, even that would have been a comfort to him in his present affliction. “D——tion!” he said at last, as he jumped to his feet and kicked the chair on one side, and threw the pipe among the ashes. I trust it will be understood that he addressed himself, and not his lady-love in this uncivil way,—“D——tion!” Then when the chair had been well kicked out of his way, he took himself up to bed. I wonder whether Clara's heart would have been hardened or softened towards him had she heard the oath, and understood all the thoughts and motives which had produced it.

On the next morning poor Mary Belton

was too ill to come down-stairs; and as her brother spent his whole day out upon the farm, remaining among reapers and wheat stacks till nine o'clock in the evening, nothing was said about Clara on that day. Then there came a Sunday, and it was a matter of course that the subject of which they both were thinking should be discussed. Will went to church, and, as was their custom on Sundays, they dined immediately on his return. Then, as the afternoon was very warm, he took her out to a favourite seat she had in the garden, and it became impossible that they could longer abstain.

“And you really mean to go again at Christmas?” she asked.

“Certainly I shall;—I promised.”

“Then I am sure you will.”

“And I must go from time to time because of the land I have taken. Indeed there seems to be an understanding that I am to manage the property for Mr. Amedroz.”

“And does she wish you to go?”

“Yes,—she says so.”

“Girls, I believe, think sometimes that men are indifferent in their love. They suppose that a man can forget it at once when he is not accepted, and that things can go on just as before.”

“I suppose she thinks so of me,” said Belton wofully.

“She must either think that, or else be willing to give herself the chance of learning to like you better.”

“There’s nothing of that, I’m sure. She’s as true as steel.”

“But she would hardly want you to go there unless she thought you might overcome either your love or her indifference. She would not wish you to be there that you might be miserable.”

“Before I had asked her to be my wife I had promised to be her brother. And so I will, if she should ever want a brother. I am not going to desert her because she will not do what I want her to do, or be what I want her to be. She understands that. There is to be no quarrel between us.”

“But she would be heartless if she were to encourage you to be with her simply for the assistance you may give her, knowing at the same time that you could not be happy in her presence.”

“She is not heartless.”

“Then she must suppose that you are.”

“I dare say she doesn't think that I care much about it. When I told her, I did it all of a heap, you see; and I fancy she thought I was just mad at the time.”

“And did you speak about it again?”

“No; not a word. I shouldn't wonder if she hadn't forgotten it before I went away.”

“That would be impossible.”

“You wouldn't say so if you knew how it was done. It was all over in half an hour; and she had given me such an answer that I thought I had no right to say anything more about it. The morning when I left her she did seem to be kinder.”

“I wish I knew whether she cares for any one else.”

“Ah! I so often think of that. But I

couldn't ask her, you know. I had no right to pry into her secrets. When I came away, she got up to see me off; and I almost felt tempted to carry her into the gig and drive her off."

"I don't think that would have done, Will."

"I don't suppose anything will do. We all know what happens to the child who cries for the top brick of the chimney. The child has to do without it. The child goes to bed and forgets it; but I go to bed,—and can't forget it."

"My poor Will!"

Then he got up and shook himself, and stalked about the garden,—always keeping within a few yards of his sister's chair,—and carried on a strong battle within his breast, struggling to get the better of the weakness which his love produced, though resolved that the love itself should be maintained.

"I wish it wasn't Sunday," he said [at last, "because then I could go and do something. If I thought that no one would see me, I'd fill

a dung-cart or two, even though it is Sunday. I'll tell you what ;—I'll go and take a walk as far as Denvir Sluice ; and I'll be back to tea. You won't mind ?”

“ Denvir Sluice is eight miles off.”

“ Exactly,—I'll be there and back in something over three hours.”

“ But, Will,—there's a broiling sun.”

“ It will do me good. Anything that will take something out of me is what I want. I know I ought to stay and read to you ; but I couldn't do it. I've got the fidgets inside, if you know what that means. To have the big hay-rick on fire, or something of that sort, is what would do me most good.”

Then he started, and did walk to Denvir Sluice and back in three hours. The road from Plaistow Hall to Denvir Sluice was not in itself interesting. It ran through a perfectly flat country, without a tree. For the greater part of the way it was constructed on the top of a great bank by the side of a broad dike, and for five miles its course was straight as a line. A country walk less picturesque

could hardly be found in England. The road, too, was very dusty, and the sun was hot above Belton's head as he walked. But nevertheless, he persevered, going on till he struck his stick against the waterfall which was called Denvir Sluice, and then returned,—not once slackening his pace, and doing the whole distance at a rate somewhat above five miles an hour. They used to say in the nursery that cold pudding is good to settle a man's love; but the receipt which Belton tried was a walk of sixteen miles, along a dusty road, after dinner, in the middle of an August day.

I think it did him some good. When he got back he took a long draught of home-brewed beer, and then went up-stairs to dress himself.

“What a state you are in,” Mary said to him when he showed himself for a moment in the sitting-room.

“I did it from milestone to milestone in eleven minutes, backwards and forwards, all along the five-mile reach.”

Then Mary knew from his answer that the exercise had been of service to him, perceiving that he had been able to take an interest in his own prowess as a walker.

“I only hope you won’t have a fever,” she said.

“The people who stand still are they who get fevers,” he answered. “Hard work never does harm to any one. If John Bowden would walk his five miles an hour on a Sunday afternoon he wouldn’t have the gout so often.”

John Bowden was a neighbour in the next parish, and Mary was delighted to find that her brother could take a pride in his performance.

By degrees Miss Belton began to know with some accuracy the way in which Will had managed his affairs at Belton Castle, and was enabled to give him salutary advice.

“You see, Will,” she said, “ladies are different from men in this, that they cannot allow themselves to be in love so suddenly.”

“I don’t see how a person is to help it. It

isn't like jumping into a river, which a person can do or not, just as he pleases."

"But I fancy it is something like jumping into a river, and that a person can help it. What the person can't help is being in when the plunge has once been made."

"No, by George! There's no getting out of that river."

"And ladies don't take the plunge till they've had time to think what may come after it. Perhaps you were a little too sudden with our cousin Clara?"

"Of course I was. Of course I was a fool, and a brute too."

"I know you were not a brute, and I don't think you were a fool; but yet you were too sudden. You see a lady cannot always make up her mind to love a man, merely because she is asked—all in a moment. She should have a little time to think about it before she is called upon for an answer."

"And I didn't give her two minutes."

"You never do give two minutes to anyone;—do you, Will? But you'll be back

there at Christmas, and then she will have had time to turn you and it over in her mind."

"And you think that I may have a chance?"

"Certainly you may have a chance."

"Although she was so sure about it?"

"She spoke of her own mind and her own heart as she knew them then. But it depends chiefly on this, Will,—whether there is any one else. For anything we know, she may be engaged now."

"Of course she may." Then Belton speculated on the extreme probability of such a contingency; arguing within his own heart that of course every [unmarried man who might see Clara would want to marry her, and that there could not but be some one whom even she would be able to love.

When he had been [home about a fortnight, there came a letter to him from Clara, which was a great treasure to him. In truth, it simply told him of the completion of the cattle-shed, of her father's health, and of the

milk which the little cow gave; but she signed herself his affectionate cousin, and the letter was very gratifying to him. There were two lines of a postscript, which could not but flatter him:—"Papa is so anxious for Christmas, that you may be here again;—and so, indeed, am I also." Of course it will be understood that this was written before Clara's visit to Perivale, and before Mrs. Winterfield's death. Indeed, much happened in Clara's history between the writing of that letter and Will Belton's winter visit to the Castle.

But Christmas came at last, all too slowly for Will;—and he started on his journey. On this occasion he arranged to stay a week in London, having a lawyer there whom he desired to see; and thinking, perhaps, that a short time spent among the theatres might assist him in his love troubles.

CHAPTER III.

MR. WILLIAM BELTON TAKES A WALK IN
LONDON.

AT the time of my story there was a certain Mr. Green, a worthy attorney, who held chambers in Stone Buildings, Lincoln's Inn, much to the profit of himself and family,—and to the profit and comfort also of a numerous body of clients,—a man much respected in the neighbourhood of Chancery Lane, and beloved, I do not doubt, in the neighbourhood of Bushey, in which delightfully rural parish he was possessed of a genteel villa and ornamental garden. With Mr. Green's private residence we shall, I believe, have no further concern ;

but to him at his chambers in Stone Buildings I must now introduce the reader of these memoirs. He was a man not yet forty years of age, with still much of the salt of youth about him, a pleasant companion as well as a good lawyer, and one who knew men and things in London, as it is given to pleasant clever fellows, such as Joseph Green, to know them. Now Mr. Green, and his father before him, had been the legal advisers of the Amedroz family, and our Mr. Joseph Green had had but a bad time of it with Charles Amedroz in the last years of that unfortunate young man's life. But lawyers endure these troubles, submitting themselves to the extravagances, embarrassments, and even villany of the bad subjects among their clients' families, with a good-humoured patience that is truly wonderful. That, however, was all over now as regarded Mr. Green and the Amedrozes, and he had nothing further to do but to save for the father what relics of the property he might secure. And he was also legal adviser to our friend Will Belton, there

having been some old family connection among them, and had often endeavoured to impress upon his old client at Belton Castle his own strong conviction that the heir was a generous fellow, who might be trusted in everything. But this had been taken amiss by the old squire, who, indeed, was too much disposed to take all things amiss and to suspect everybody. "I understand," he had said to his daughter. "I know all about it. Belton and Mr. Green have been dear friends always. I can't trust my own lawyer any longer." In all which the old squire showed much ingratitude. It will, however, be understood that these suspicions were rife before the time of Belton's visit to the family estate.

Some four or five days before Christmas there came a visitor to Mr. Green with whom the reader is acquainted, and who was no less a man than the member for Perivale. Captain Aylmer, when Clara parted from him on the morning of her return to Belton Castle, had resolved that he would repeat his offer of marriage by letter. A month had passed by

since then, and he had not as yet repeated it. But his intention was not altered. He was a deliberate man, who did not do such things quite as quickly as his rival, and who upon this occasion had thought it prudent to turn over more than once in his mind all that he proposed to do. Nor had he as yet taken any definite steps as to that fifteen hundred pounds which he had promised to Clara in her aunt's name, and which Clara had been, and was, so unwilling to receive. He had now actually paid it over, having purchased government stock in Clara's name for the amount, and had called upon Mr. Green, in order that that gentleman, as Clara's lawyer, might make the necessary communication to her.

“I suppose there's nothing further to be done?” asked Captain Aylmer.

“Nothing further by me,” said the lawyer. “Of course I shall write to her, and explain that she must make arrangements as to the interest. I am very glad that her aunt thought of her in her last moments.”

“Mrs. Winterfield would have provided for her before, had she known that everything had been swallowed up by that unfortunate young man.”

“All’s well that ends well. Fifteen hundred pounds are better than nothing.”

“Is it not enough?” said the Captain, blushing.

“It isn’t for me to have an opinion about that, Captain Aylmer. It depends on the nature of the claim; and that again depends on the relative position of the aunt and niece when they were alive together.”

“You are aware that Miss Amedroz was not Mrs. Winterfield’s niece?”

“Do not think for a moment that I am criticising the amount of the legacy. I am very glad of it, as, without it, there was literally no provision,—no provision at all.”

“You will write to herself?”

“Oh yes, certainly to herself. She is a better man of business than her father;—and then this is her own, to do as she likes with it.”

“ She can’t refuse it, I suppose ?”

“ Refuse it !”

“ Even though she did not wish to take it, it would be legally her property, just as though it had been really left by the will ?”

“ Well ; I don’t know. I dare say you could have resisted the payment. But that has been made now, and there seems to be an end of it.”

At this moment a clerk entered the room and handed a card to his employer. “ Here’s the heir himself,” said Mr. Green.

“ What heir ?”

“ Will Belton ;—the heir of the property which Mr. Amedroz holds.” Captain Aylmer had soon explained that he was not personally acquainted with Mr. William Belton ; but, having heard much about him, declared himself anxious to make the acquaintance. Our friend Will, therefore, was ushered into the room, and the two rivals for Clara’s favour were introduced to each other. Each had heard much of the other, and each had heard

of the other from the same person. But Captain Aylmer knew much more as to Belton than Belton knew in respect to him. Aylmer knew that Belton had proposed to Clara and had been rejected; and he knew also that Belton was now again going down to Somersetshire.

“You are to spend your Christmas, I believe, with our friends at Belton Castle?” said the Captain.

“Yes;—and am now on my way there. I believe you know them also,—intimately.” Then there was some explanation as to the Winterfield connection, a few remarks as to the precarious state of the old squire’s health, a message or two from Captain Aylmer, which of course were of no importance, and the Captain took his leave.

Then Green and Belton became very comfortably intimate in their conversation, calling each other Will and Joe,—for they were old and close friends. And they discussed matters in that cozy tone of confidential intercourse which is so directly at variance with the tones

used by men when they ordinarily talk of business. "He has brought me good news for your friend, Miss Amedroz," said the lawyer.

"What good news?"

"That aunt of hers left her fifteen hundred pounds, after all. Or rather, she did not leave it, but desired on her death-bed that it might be given."

"That's the same thing, I suppose?"

"Oh quite;—that is to say, it's the same thing if the person who has to hand over the money does not dispute the legacy. But it shows how the old lady's conscience pricked her at last. And after all it was a shabby sum, and should have been three times as much."

"Fifteen hundred pounds! And that is all she will have when her father dies?"

"Every farthing, Will. You'll take all the rest."

"I wish she wasn't going to have that."

"Why? Why on earth should you of all men grudge her such a moderate maintenance, seeing that you have not got to pay it?"

“It isn’t a maintenance. How could it be a maintenance for such as her? What sort of maintenance would it be?”

“Much better than nothing. And so you would feel if she were your daughter.”

“She shall be my daughter, or my sister, or whatever you like to call her. You don’t think that I’ll take the whole estate and leave her to starve on the interest of fifteen hundred pounds a year!”

“You’d better make her your wife at once, Will.”

Will Belton blushed as he answered, “That, perhaps, would be easier said than done. That is not in my power,—even if I should wish it. But the other is in my power.”

“Will, take my advice, and don’t make any romantic promises when you are down at Belton. You’ll be sure to regret them if you do. And you should remember that in truth Miss Amedroz has no greater claim on you than any other lady in the land.”

“Isn’t she my cousin?”

“Well;—yes. She is your cousin, but a

distant one only; and I'm not aware that cousinship gives any claim."

"Who is she to have a claim on? I'm the nearest she has got. Besides, am not I going to take all the property which ought to be hers?"

"That's just it. There's no such ought in the case. The property is as much your own as this poker is mine. That's exactly the mistake I want you to guard against. If you liked her, and chose to marry her, that would be all very well; presuming that you don't want to get money in marriage."

"I hate the idea of marrying for money."

"All right. Then marry Miss Amedroz if you please. But don't make any rash undertakings to be her father, or her brother, or her uncle, or her aunt. Such romance always leads a man into trouble."

"But I've done it already."

"What do you mean?"

"I've told her that I would be her brother, and that as long as I had a shilling she should never want sixpence. And I mean it. And

as for what you say about romance and repenting it, that simply comes from your being a lawyer."

"Thank ye, Will."

"If one goes to a chemist, of course one gets physic, and has to put up with the bad smells."

"Thank you again."

"But the chemist may be a very good sort of fellow at home all the same, and have a cupboard full of sweetmeats and a garden full of flowers. However, the thing is done as far as I am concerned, and I can almost find it in my heart to be sorry that Clara has got this driblet of money. Fifteen hundred pounds! It would keep her out of the workhouse, and that is about all."

"If you knew how many ladies in her position would think that the heavens had rained wealth upon them if some one would give them fifteen hundred pounds!"

"Very well. At any rate I won't take it away from her. And now I want you to tell me something else. Do you remember a fellow we used to know named Berdmore?"

“ Philip Berdmore ? ”

“ He may have been Philip, or Daniel, or Jeremiah, for anything I know. But the man I mean was very much given to taking his liquor freely.”

“ That was Jack Berdmore, Philip’s brother. Oh yes, I remember him. He’s dead now. He drank himself to death at last, out in India.”

“ He was in the army ? ”

“ Yes ;—and what a pleasant fellow he was at times ! I see Phil constantly, and Phil’s wife, but they never speak of Jack.”

“ He got married, didn’t he, after we used to see him ? ”

“ Oh yes ;—he and Phil married sisters. It was a sad affair, that.”

“ I remember being with him and her,—and the sister too, after they were engaged, and he got so drunk that we were obliged to take him away. There was a large party of us at Richmond, but I don’t think you were there.”

“ But I heard of it.”

“ And she was a Miss Vigo ? ”

“Exactly. I see the younger sister constantly. Phil isn’t very rich, and he’s got a lot of children,—but he’s very happy.”

“What became of the other sister?”

“Of Jack’s wife?”

“Yes. What became of her?”

“I haven’t an idea. Something bad, I suppose, as they never speak of her.”

“And how long is he dead?”

“He died about three years since. I only knew it from Phil’s telling me that he was in mourning for him. Then he did speak of him for a moment or two, and I came to know that he had carried on to the end in the same way. If a fellow takes to drink in this country, he’ll never get cured in India.”

“I suppose not.”

“Never.”

“And now I want to find out something about his widow.”

“And why?”

“Ah;—I’m not sure that I can tell you why. Indeed I’m sure that I cannot. But still you might be able to assist me.”

“There were heaps of people who used to know the Vigos,” said the lawyer.

“No end of people,—though I couldn’t for the life of me say who any of them were.”

“They used to come out in London with an aunt, but nobody knew much about her. I fancy they had neither father nor mother.”

“They were very pretty.”

“And how well they danced! I don’t think I ever knew a girl who danced so pleasantly,—giving herself no airs, you know,—as Mary Vigo.”

“Her name was Mary,” said Belton, remembering that Mrs. Askerton’s name was also Mary.

“Jack Berdmore married Mary.”

“Well now, Joe, you must find out for me what became of her. Was she with her husband when he died?”

“Nobody was with him. Phil told me so. No one, that is, but a young lieutenant and his own servant. It was very sad. He had D. T., and all that sort of thing.”

“And where was she?”

“At Jericho, for anything that I know.”

“Will you find out?” Then Mr. Joseph Green thought for a moment of his capabilities in that line, and having made an engagement to dine with his friend at his club on the evening before Will left London, said at last that he thought he could find out through certain mutual friends who had known the Berdmores in the old days. “But the fact is,” said the lawyer, “that the world is so good-natured,—instead of being ill-natured, as people say,—that it always forgets those who want to be forgotten.”

We must now go back for a few moments to Captain Aylmer and his affairs. Having given a full month to the consideration of his position as regarded Miss Amedroz, he made up his mind to two things. In the first place, he would at once pay over to her the money which was to be hers as her aunt’s legacy, and then he would renew his offer. To that latter determination he was guided by mixed motives,—by motives which, when joined together, rarely fail to be operative. His conscience told him that he ought to do so,—and then

the fact of her having, as it were, taken herself away from him, made him again wish to possess her. And there was another cause which, perhaps, operated in the same direction. He had consulted his mother, and she had strongly advised him to have nothing further to do with Miss Amedroz. Lady Aylmer abused her dead sister heartily for having interfered in the matter, and endeavoured to prove to her son that he was released from his promise by having in fact performed it. But on this point his conscience interfered,—backed by his wishes,—and he made his resolve as has been above stated. On leaving Mr. Green's chambers he went to his own lodgings, and wrote his letter, as follows:—

“ Mount Street, December, 186—

“ DEAREST CLARA,

“ When you parted from me at Perivale you said certain things about our engagement which I have come to understand better since then, than I did at the time. It escaped from me that my dear aunt and I had had some

conversation about you, and that I had told her what was my intention. Something was said about a promise, and I think it was that word which made you unhappy. At such a time as that, when I and my aunt were talking together, and when she was, as she well knew, on her deathbed, things will be said which would not be thought of in other circumstances. I can only assure you now, that the promise I gave her was a promise to do that which I had previously resolved upon doing. If you can believe what I say on this head, that ought to be sufficient to remove the feeling which induced you to break our engagement.

“I now write to renew my offer to you, and to assure you that I do so with my whole heart. You will forgive me if I tell you that I cannot fail to remember, and always to bear in my mind, the sweet assurances which you gave me of your regard for myself. As I do not know that anything has occurred to alter your opinion of me, I write this letter in strong hope that it may be successful. I

believe that your fear was in respect to my affection for you, not as to yours for me. If this was so, I can assure you that there is no necessity for such fear.

“ I need not tell you that I shall expect your answer with great anxiety.

“ Yours most affectionately,

“ F. F. AYLMER.

“ P.S. I have to-day caused to be bought in your name Bank Stock to the amount of fifteen hundred pounds, the amount of the legacy coming to you from my aunt.”

This letter, and that from Mr. Green respecting the money, both reached Clara on the same morning. Now, having learned so much as to the position of affairs at Belton Castle, we may return to Will and his dinner engagement with Mr. Joseph Green.

“ And what have you heard about Mrs. Berdmore?” Belton asked, almost as soon as the two men were together.

“ I wish I knew why you want to know.”

“I don't want to do anybody any harm.”

“Do you want to do anybody any good?”

“Any good! I can't say that I want to do any particular good. The truth is, I think I know where she is, and that she is living under a false name.”

“Then you know more of her than I do.”

“I don't know anything. I'm only in doubt. But as the lady I mean lives near to friends of mine, I should like to know.”

“That you may expose her?”

“No;—by no means. But I hate the idea of deceit. The truth is, that any one living anywhere under a false name should be exposed,—or should be made to assume their right name.”

“I find that Mrs. Berdmore left her husband some years before he died. There was nothing in that to create wonder, for he was a man with whom a woman could hardly continue to live. But I fear she left him under protection that was injurious to her character.”

“And how long ago is that?”

“I do not know. Some years before his death.”

“And how long ago did he die?”

“About three years since. My informant tells me that he believes she has since married. Now you know all that I know.” And Belton also knew that Mrs. Askerton of the cottage was the Miss Vigo with whom he had been acquainted in earlier years.

After that they dined comfortably, and nothing passed between them which need be recorded as essential to our story till the time came for them to part. Then, when they were both standing at the club door, the lawyer said a word or two which is essential. “So you’re off to-morrow?” said he.

“Yes; I shall go down by the express.”

“I wish you a pleasant journey. By-the-bye, I ought to tell you that you won’t have any trouble in being either father or mother, or uncle or aunt to Miss Amedroz.”

“Why not?”

“I suppose it’s no secret.”

“What’s no secret?”

“She’s going to be married to Captain Aylmer.”

Then Will Belton started so violently, and assumed on a sudden so manifest a look of anger, that his tale was at once told to Mr. Green. “Who says so?” he asked. “I don’t believe it.”

“I’m afraid it’s true all the same, Will.”

“Who says it?”

“Captain Aylmer was with me to-day, and he told me. He ought to be good authority on such a subject?”

“He told you that he was going to marry Clara Amedroz?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“And what made him come to you, to tell you?”

“There was a question about some money which he had paid to her, and which, under existing circumstances, he thought it as well that he should not pay. Matters of that kind are often necessarily told to lawyers. But I should not have told it to you, Will, if I had not thought that it was good news.”

“It is not good news,” said Belton moodily.

“At any rate, old fellow, my telling it will do no harm. You must have learned it soon.” And he put his hand kindly,—almost tenderly, on the other’s arm. But Belton moved himself away angrily. The wound had been so lately inflicted that he could not as yet forgive the hand that had seemed to strike him.

“I’m sorry that it should be so bad with you, Will.”

“What do you mean by bad? It is not bad with me. It is very well with me. Keep your pity for those who want it.” Then he walked off by himself across the broad street before the club door, leaving his friend without a word of farewell, and made his way up into St. James’s Square, choosing, as was evident to Mr. Green, the first street that would take him out of sight.

“He’s hit, and hit hard,” said the lawyer, looking after him. “Poor fellow! I might have guessed it from what he said. I never knew of his caring for any woman before.”

Then Mr. Green put on his gloves and went away home.

We will now follow Will Belton into St. James's Square, and we shall follow a very unhappy gentleman. Doubtless he had hitherto known and appreciated the fact that Miss Amedroz had refused his offer, and had often declared, both to himself and to his sister, his conviction that that refusal would never be reversed. But, in spite of that expressed conviction, he had lived on hope. Till she belonged to another man she might yet be his. He might win her at last by perseverance. At any rate he had it in his power to work towards the desired end, and might find solace even in that working. And the misery of his loss would not be so great to him,—as he found himself forced to confess to himself before he had completed his wanderings on this night,—in not having her for his own, as it would be in knowing that she had given herself to another man. He had often told himself that of course she would become the wife of some man, but he had never yet

realised to himself what it would be to know that she was the wife of any one specified rival. He had been sad enough on that moonlight night in the avenue at Plaistow,—when he had leaned against the tree, striking his hands together as he thought of his great want; but his unhappiness then had been as nothing to his agony now. Now it was all over,—and he knew the man who had supplanted him!

How he hated him! With what an unchristian spirit did he regard that worthy captain as he walked across St. James's Square, across Jermyn Street, across Piccadilly, and up Bond Street, not knowing whither he was going. He thought with an intense regret of the laws of modern society which forbid duelling,—forgetting altogether that even had the old law prevailed, the conduct of the man whom he so hated would have afforded him no *casus belli*. But he was too far gone in misery and animosity to be capable of any reason on the matter. Captain Aylmer had interfered with his dearest wishes, and during this now passing hour he would willingly have crucified

Captain Aylmer had it been within his power to do so. Till he had gone beyond Oxford Street, and had wandered away into the far distance of Portman Square and Baker Street, he had not begun to think of any interest which Clara Amedroz might have in the matter on which his thoughts were employed. He was sojourning at an hotel in Bond Street, and had gone thitherwards more by habit than by thought; but he had passed the door of his inn, feeling it to be impossible to render himself up to his bed in his present disturbed mood. As he was passing the house in Bond Street he had been intent on the destruction of Captain Aylmer,—and had almost determined that if Captain Aylmer could not be made to vanish into eternity, he must make up his mind to go that road himself.

It was out of the question that he should go down to Belton. As to that he had come to a very decided opinion by the time that he had crossed Oxford Street. Go down to see her, when she had treated him after this fashion! No, indeed. She wanted no brother now. She

had chosen to trust herself to this other man, and he, Will Belton, would not interfere further in her affairs. Then he drew upon his imagination for a picture of the future, in which he portrayed Captain Aylmer as a ruined man, who would probably desert his wife, and make himself generally odious to all his acquaintance—a picture as to the realisation of which I am bound to say that Captain Aylmer's antecedents gave no probability. But it was the looking at this self-drawn picture which first softened the artist's heart towards the victim whom he had immolated on his imaginary canvas. When Clara should be ruined by the baseness and villany and general scampishness of this man whom she was going to marry,—to whom she was about to be weak enough and fool enough to trust herself,—then he would interpose and be her brother once again,—a broken-hearted brother no doubt, but a brother efficacious to keep the wolf from the door of this poor woman and her—children. Then, as he thus created Captain Aylmer's embryo family of unprovided orphans,—for after a while he

killed the captain, making him to die some death that was very disgraceful, but not very distinct even to his own imagination,—as he thought of those coming pledges of a love which was to him so bitter, he stormed about the streets, performing antics of which no one would have believed him capable, who had known him as the thriving Mr. William Belton, of Plaistow Hall, among the fens of Norfolk.

But the character of a man is not to be judged from the pictures which he may draw or from the antics which he may play in his solitary hours. Those who act generally with the most consummate wisdom in the affairs of the world, often meditate very silly doings before their wiser resolutions form themselves. I beg, therefore, that Mr. Belton may be regarded and criticised in accordance with his conduct on the following morning,—when his midnight rambles, which finally took him even beyond the New Road, had been followed by a few tranquil hours in his Bond Street bedroom;—for at last he did bring

himself to return thither and put himself to bed after the usual fashion. He put himself to bed in a spirit somewhat tranquillised by the exercise of the night, and at last—wept himself to sleep like a baby.

But he was by no means like a baby when he took him early on the following morning to the Paddington Station, and booked himself manfully for Taunton. He had had time to recognise the fact that he had no ground of quarrel with his cousin because she had preferred another man to him. This had happened to him as he was recrossing the New Road about two o'clock, and was beginning to find that his legs were weary under him. And, indeed, he had recognised one or two things before he had gone to sleep with his tears dripping on to his pillow. In the first place, he had ill-treated Joe Green, and had made a fool of himself in his friend's presence. As Joe Green was a sensible, kind-hearted fellow, this did not much signify;—but not on that account did he omit to tell himself of his own fault. Then he discovered

that it would ill become him to break his word to Mr. Amedroz and to his daughter, and to do so without a word of excuse, because Clara had exercised a right which was indisputably her own. He had undertaken certain work at Belton which required his presence, and he would go down and do his work as though nothing had occurred to disturb him. To remain away because of this misfortune would be to show the white feather. It would be unmanly. All this he recognised as the pictures he had painted faded away from their canvases. As to Captain Aylmer himself, he hoped that he might never be called upon to meet him. He still hoped that, even as he was resolutely cramming his shirts into his portmanteau before he began his journey. His cousin Clara he thought he could meet, and tender to her some expression of good wishes as to her future life, without giving way under the effort. And to the old squire he could endeavour to make himself pleasant, speaking of the relief from all trouble which this marriage with Captain Aylmer would afford,—

for now, in his cooler moments, he could perceive that Captain Aylmer was not a man apt to ruin himself, or his wife and children. But to Captain Aylmer himself, he could not bring himself to say pleasant things or to express pleasant wishes. She who was to be Captain Aylmer's wife, who loved him, would of course have told him what had occurred up among the rocks in Belton Park; and if that was so, any meeting between Will and Captain Aylmer would be death to the former.

Thinking of all this he journeyed down to Taunton, and thinking of all this he made his way from Taunton across to Belton Park.

CHAPTER IV.

EVIL WORDS.

CLARA AMEDROZ had received her two letters together,—that, namely, from the attorney, and that from Captain Aylmer,—and the result of those letters is already known. She accepted her lover's renewed offer of marriage, acknowledging the force of his logic, and putting faith in the strength of his assurances. This she did without seeking advice from any one. Who was there from whom she could seek advice on such a matter as that?—who, at least, was there at Belton? That her father would, as a matter of course, bid her accept Captain Aylmer, was, she thought,

certain; and she knew well that Mrs. Asker-ton would do the same. She asked no counsel from any one, but taking the two letters up to her own room, sat down to consider them. That which referred to her aunt's money, together with the postscript in Captain Aylmer's letter on the same subject, would be of the least possible moment if she could bring herself to give a favourable answer to the other proposition. But should she not be able to do this,—should she hesitate as to doing so at once,—then she must write to the lawyer in very strong terms, refusing altogether to have anything to do with the money. And in such a case as this, not a word could she say to her father either on one subject or on the other.

But why should she not accept the offer made to her? Captain Aylmer declared that he had determined to ask her to be his wife before he had made any promise to Mrs. Winterfield. If this were in truth so, then the very ground on which she had separated herself from him would be removed. Why

should she hesitate in acknowledging to herself that she loved the man and believed him to be true? So she sat herself down and answered both the letters,—writing to the lawyer first. To him she said that nothing need be done about the money or the interest till he should see or hear from Captain Aylmer again. Then to Captain Aylmer she wrote very shortly, but very openly,—with the same ill-judged candour which her spoken words to him had displayed. Of course she would be his; his without hesitation, now that she knew that he expressed his own wishes, and not merely those of his aunt. “As to the money,” she said, “it would be simply nonsense now for us to have any talk of money. It is yours in any way, and you had better manage about it as you please. I have written an ambiguous letter to Mr. Green, which will simply plague him, and which you may go and see if you like.” Then she added her postscript, in which she said that she should now at once tell her father, as the news would remove from his mind all solicitude as to her future

position. That Captain Aylmer did go to Mr. Green we already know, and we know also that he told Mr. Green of his intended marriage.

Nothing was said by Captain Aylmer as to any proposed period for their marriage; but that was only natural. It was not probable that any man would name a day till he knew whether or not he was accepted. Indeed, Clara, on thinking over the whole affair, was now disposed to find fault rather with herself than with her lover, and forgetting his coldness and formality at Perivale, remembered only the fact of his offer to her, and his assurance now received that he had intended to make it before the scene which had taken place between him and his aunt. She did find fault with herself, telling herself that she had quarrelled with him without sufficient cause;—and the eager, loving candour of her letter to him was attributable to those self-accusations.

“Papa,” she said, after the postman had gone away from Belton, so that there might

be no possibility of any recall of her letter, "I have something to tell you which I hope will give you pleasure."

"It isn't often that I hear anything of that kind," said he.

"But I think that this will give you pleasure. I do indeed. I am going to be married."

"Going to what?"

"Going to be married, papa. That is, if I have your leave. Of course any offer of that kind that I have accepted is subject to your approval."

"And I have been told nothing about it!"

"It began at Perivale, and I could not tell you then. You do not ask me who is to be my husband."

"It is not Will Belton?"

"Poor Will! No; it is not Will. It is Frederic Aylmer. I think you would prefer him as a son-in-law even to my cousin Will."

"No I shouldn't. Why should I prefer a man whom I don't even know, who lives

in London, and who will take you away, so that I shall never see you again?"

"Dear papa;—don't speak of it in that way. I thought you would be glad to know that I was to be so—so—so happy!"

"But why is it to be done this way,—of a sudden? Why didn't he come to me? Will came to me the very first thing."

"He couldn't come all the way to Belton very well;—particularly as he does not know you."

"Will came here."

"Oh, papa, don't make difficulties. Of course that was different. He was here when he first thought of it. And even then he didn't think very much about it."

"He did all that he could, I suppose?"

"Well;—yes. I don't know how that might be." And Clara almost laughed as she felt the difficulties into which she was creeping. "Dear Will. He is much better as a cousin than as a husband."

"I don't see that at all. Captain Aylmer will not have the Belton estate or Plaistow Hall."

“Surely he is well enough off to take care of a wife. He will have the whole of the Perivale estate, you know.”

“I dont know anything about it. According to my ideas of what is proper he should have spoken to me first. If he could not come he might have written. No doubt my ideas may be old-fashioned, and I’m told that Captain Aylmer is a fashionable young man.”

“Indeed he is not, papa. He is a hard-working member of Parliament.”

“I don’t know that he is any better for that. People seem to think that if a man is a member of Parliament he may do what he pleases. There is Thompson, the member for Minehead, who has bought some sort of place out by the moors. I never saw so vulgar, pig-headed a fellow in my life. Being in Parliament used to be something when I was young, but it won’t make a man a gentleman now-a-days. It seems to me that none but brewers, and tallow-chandlers, and lawyers go into Parliament now. Will Belton could go

into Parliament if he pleased, but he knows better than that. He won't make himself such a fool."

This was not comfortable to Clara; but she knew her father, and allowed him to go on with his grumbling. He would come round by degrees, and he would appreciate, if he could not be induced to acknowledge, the wisdom of the step she was about to take.

"When is it to be?" he asked.

"Nothing of that kind has ever been mentioned, papa."

"It had better be soon, if I am to have anything to do with it." Now it was certainly the case that the old man was very ill. He had not been out of the house since Clara had returned home; and, though he was always grumbling about his food, he could hardly be induced to eat anything when the morsels for which he expressed a wish were got for him.

"Of course you will be consulted, papa, before anything is settled."

"I don't want to be in anybody's way, my dear."

“And may I tell Frederic that you have given your consent?”

“What’s the use of my consenting or not consenting? If you had been anxious to oblige me you would have taken your cousin Will.”

“Oh, papa, how could I accept a man I didn’t love?”

“You seemed to me to be very fond of him at first; and I must say, I thought he was ill-treated.”

“Papa, papa; do not say such things as that to me!”

“What am I to do? You tell me, and I can’t altogether hold my tongue.” Then there was a pause. “Well, my dear, as for my consent, of course you may have it,—if it’s worth anything. I don’t know that I ever heard anything bad about Captain Aylmer.”

He had heard nothing bad about Captain Aylmer! Clara, as she left her father, felt that this was very grievous. Whatever cause she might have had for discontent with her lover, she could not but be aware that he was a man whom any father might be proud to

welcome as a suitor for his daughter. He was a man as to whom no ill tales had ever been told;—who had never been known to do anything wrong or imprudent; who had always been more than respectable, and as to whose worldly position no exception could be taken. She had been entitled to expect her father's warmest congratulations, and her tidings had been received as though she had proposed to give her hand to one whose character and position only just made it not imperative on the father to withhold his consent! All this was hard, and feeling it to be so, she went upstairs, all alone, and cried bitterly as she thought of it.

On the next day she went down to the cottage and saw Mrs. Askerton. She went there with the express purpose of telling her friend of her engagement,—desirous of obtaining in that quarter the sympathy which her father declined to give her. Had her communication to him been accepted in a different spirit, she might probably have kept her secret from Mrs. Askerton till something further had

been fixed about her marriage ; but she was in want of a few kind words, and pined for some of that encouragement which ladies in love usually wish to receive, at any rate from some one chosen friend. But when she found herself alone with Mrs. Askerton she hardly knew how to tell her news ; and at first could not tell it at all, as that lady was eager in speaking on another subject.

“When do you expect your cousin ?” Mrs. Askerton asked, almost as soon as Clara was seated.

“The day after to-morrow.”

“And he is in London now ?”

“He may be. I dare say he is. But I don’t know anything about it.”

“I can tell you then that he is. Colonel Askerton has heard of his being there.”

“You seem to speak of it as though there were some offence in it. Is there any reason why he should not be in London if he pleases ?”

“None in the least. I would much rather that he should be there than here.”

“Why so? Will his coming hurt you?”

“I don’t like him. I don’t like him at all;—and now you know the truth. You believe in him;—I don’t. You think him to be a fine fellow and a gentleman, whereas I don’t think him to be either.”

“Mrs. Askerton!”

“This is strong language, I know.”

“Very strong language.”

“Yes, my dear; but the truth is, Clara, that you and I, living together here this sort of hermit’s life, each seeing so much of the other and seeing nothing of anybody else, must either be real friends, telling each other what we think, or we must be nothing. We can’t go on with the ordinary make-believes of society, saying little civil speeches and not going beyond them. Therefore I have made up my mind to tell you in plain language that I don’t like your cousin, and don’t believe in him.”

“I don’t know what you mean by believing in a man.”

“I believe in you. Sometimes I have thought that you believe in me, and sometimes

I have feared that you do not. I think that you are good, and honest, and true; and therefore I like to see your face and hear your voice,—though it is not often that you say very pleasant things to me.”

“Do I say unpleasant things?”

“I am not going to quarrel with you,—not if I can help it. What business has Mr. Belton to go about London making inquiries as to me? What have I done to him, that he should honour me so far?”

“Has he made inquiries?”

“Yes; he has. If you have been contented with me as I am,—if you are satisfied, why should he want to learn more? If you have any question to ask me I will answer it. But what right can he have to be asking questions among strangers?”

Clara had no question to ask, and yet she could not say that she was satisfied. She would have been better satisfied to have known more of Mrs. Askerton, but yet she had never condescended to make inquiries about her friend. But her curiosity was now greatly

raised; and, indeed, Mrs. Askerton's manner was so strange, her vehemence so unusual, and her eagerness to rush into dangerous subjects so unlike her usual tranquillity in conversation, that Clara did not know how to answer her.

“I know nothing of any questioning,” she said.

“I am sure you don't. Had I thought you did, much as I love you,—valuable as your society is to me down in this desert,—I would never speak to you again. But remember,—if you want to ask any questions, and will ask them of me,—of me,—I will answer them, and will not be angry.”

“But I don't want to ask any questions.”

“You may some day; and then you can remember what I say.”

“And am I to understand that you are determined to quarrel with my cousin Will?”

“Quarrel with him! I don't suppose that I shall see him. After what I have said it is not probable that you will bring him here, and the servant will have orders to say that I am not at home if he should call. Luckily he and

Colonel Askerton did not meet when he was here before."

"This is the most strange thing I ever heard in my life."

"You will understand it better, my dear, when he makes his communication to you."

"What communication?"

"You'll find that he'll have a communication to make. He has been so diligent and so sharp that he'll have a great deal to tell, I do not doubt. Only, remember, Clara, that if anything that he tells you makes any difference in your feelings towards me, I shall expect you to come to me and say so openly. If he makes his statement, let me make mine. I have a right to ask for that, after what I have promised."

"You may be sure that I will."

"I want nothing more. I have no distrust in you,—none in the least. I tell you that I believe in you. If you will do that, and will keep Mr. William Belton out of my way during his visit to these parts, I shall be satisfied." For some time past Mrs. Askerton

had been walking about the room, but, as she now finished speaking, she sat herself down as though the subject was fully discussed and completed. For a minute or two she made an effort to resume her usual tranquillity of manner, and in doing so attempted to smile, as though ridiculing her own energy. "I knew I should make a fool of myself when you came," she said; "and now I have done it."

"I don't think you have been a fool at all, but you may have been mistaken."

"Very well, my dear, we shall see. It's very odd what a dislike I took to that man the first time I saw him."

"And I am so fond of him!"

"Yes; he has cozened you as he has your father. I am only glad that he did not succeed in cozening you further than he did. But I ought to have known you better than to suppose you could give your heart of hearts to one who is——"

"Do not abuse him any more."

"Who is so very unlike the sort of people

with whom you have lived. I may, at any rate, say that."

"I don't know that. I haven't lived much with any one yet,—except papa, and my aunt, and you."

"But you know a gentleman when you see him."

"Come, Mrs. Askerton, I will not stand this. I thought you had done with the subject, and now you begin again. I had come here on purpose to tell you something of real importance,—that is, to me; but I must go away without telling you, unless you will give over abusing my cousin."

"I will not say a word more about him,—not at present."

"I feel so sure that you are mistaken, you know."

"Very well;—and I feel sure that you are mistaken. We will leave it so, and go to this matter of importance." But Clara felt it to be very difficult to tell her tidings after such a conversation as that which had just occurred. When she had entered the room her mind had

been tuned to the subject, and she could have found fitting words without much difficulty to herself; but now her thoughts had been scattered and her feelings hurt, and she did not know how to bring herself back to the subject of her engagement. She paused, therefore, and sat with a doubtful, hesitating look, meditating some mode of escape. "I am all ears," said Mrs. Askerton; and Clara thought that she discovered something of ridicule or of sarcasm in the tone of her friend's voice.

"I believe I'll put it off till another day," she said.

"Why so? You don't think that anything really important to you will not be important to me also?"

"I'm sure of that, but somehow——"

"You mean to say that I have ruffled you?"

"Well;—perhaps; a little."

"Then be unruffled again, like my own dear, honest Clara. I have been ruffled too, but I'll be as tranquil now as a drawing-room cat." Then Mrs. Askerton got up from her chair,

and seated herself by Clara's side on the sofa. "Come; you can't go till you've told me; and if you hesitate, I shall think that you mean to quarrel with me."

"I'll come to you to-morrow."

"No, no; you shall tell me to-day. All to-morrow you'll be preparing for your cousin."

"What nonsense!"

"Or else you'll come prepared to vindicate him, and then we shan't get on any further. Tell me what it is to-day. You can't leave me in curiosity after what you have said."

"You've heard of Captain Aylmer, I think."

"Of course I've heard of him."

"But you've never seen him?"

"You know I never have."

"I told you that he was at Perivale when Mrs. Winterfield died."

"And now he has proposed, and you are going to accept him? That will indeed be important. Is it so?—say. But don't I know it is so? Why don't you speak?"

"If you know it, why need I speak?"

“But it is so? Oh, Clara, I am so glad. I congratulate you with all my heart,—with all my heart. My dearest, dearest Clara! What a happy arrangement! What a success! It is just as it should be. Dear, good man! to come forward in that sensible way, and put an end to all the little family difficulties!”

“I don’t know so much about success. Who is it that is successful?”

“You, to be sure.”

“Then by the same measurement he must be unsuccessful.”

“Don’t be a fool, Clara.”

“Of course I have been successful if I’ve got a man that I can love as my husband.”

“Now, my dear, don’t be a fool. Of course all that is between you and him, and I don’t in the least doubt that it is all as it should be. If Captain Aylmer had been the elder brother instead of the younger, and had all the Aylmer estates instead of the Perivale property, I know you would not accept him if you did not like him.”

“I hope not.”

“I am sure you would not. But when a girl with nothing a year has managed to love a man with two or three thousand a year, and has managed to be loved by him in return,—instead of going through the same process with the curate or village doctor,—it is a success, and her friends will always think so. And when a girl marries a gentleman, and a member of Parliament, instead of——; well, I’m not going to say anything personal,—her friends will congratulate her upon his position. It may be very wicked, and mercenary, and all that; but it’s the way of the world.”

“I hate hearing about the world.”

“Yes, my dear; all proper young ladies like you do hate it. But I observe that such girls as you never offend its prejudices. You can’t but know that you would have done a wicked as well as a foolish thing to marry a man without an adequate income.”

“But I needn’t marry at all.”

“And what would you live on then? Come Clara, we needn’t quarrel about that. I’ve no doubt he’s charming, and beautiful, and——”

“He isn’t beautiful at all; and as for charming——”

“He has charmed you at any rate.”

“He has made me believe that I can trust him without doubt, and love him without fear.”

“An excellent man! And the income will be an additional comfort; you’ll allow that?”

“I’ll allow nothing.”

“And when is it to be?”

“Oh,—perhaps in six or seven years.”

“Clara!”

“Perhaps sooner; but there’s been no word said about time.”

“Is not Mr. Amedroz delighted?”

“Not a bit. He quite scolded me when I told him.”

“Why;—what did he want?”

“You know papa.”

“I know he scolds at everything, but I shouldn’t have thought he would have scolded at that. And when does he come here?”

“Who come here?”

“Captain Aylmer.”

“I don’t know that he is coming at all.”

“He must come to be married.”

“All that is in the clouds as yet. I did not like to tell you, but you mustn’t suppose that because I’ve told you, everything is settled. Nothing is settled.”

“Nothing except the one thing?”

“Nothing else.”

It was more than an hour after that before Clara went away, and when she did so she was surprised to find that she was followed out of the house by Colonel Askerton. It was quite dusk at this time, the days being just at their shortest, and Colonel Askerton, according to his custom, would have been riding, or returning from his ride. Clara had been over two hours at the cottage, and had been aware when she reached it that he had not as yet gone out. It appeared now that he had not ridden at all, and, as she remembered to have seen his horse led before the window, it at once occurred to her that he had remained at home with the view of catching her as she went away. He came up to her just as she

was passing through the gate, and offered her his right hand as he raised his hat with his left. It sometimes happens to all of us in life that we become acquainted with persons intimately,—that is, with an assumed intimacy,—whom in truth we do not know at all. We meet such persons frequently, often eating and drinking in their company, being familiar with their appearance, and well-informed generally as to their concerns; but we never find ourselves holding special conversations with them, or in any way fitting the modes of our life to the modes of their life. Accident has brought us together, and in one sense they are our friends. We should probably do any little kindness for them, or expect the same from them; but there is nothing in common between us, and there is generally a mutual though unexpressed agreement that there shall be nothing in common. Miss Amedroz was intimately acquainted with Colonel Askerton after this fashion. She saw him very frequently, and his name was often on her tongue; but she rarely, if ever,

conversed with him, and knew of his habits only from his wife's words respecting them. When, therefore, he followed her through the garden gate into the park, she was driven to suppose that he had something special to say to her.

“ I'm afraid you'll have a dark walk, Miss Amedroz,” he said.

“ It's only just across the park, and I know the way so well.”

“ Yes,—of course. I saw you coming out, and as I want to say a word or two, I have ventured to follow you. When Mr. Belton was down here I did not have the pleasure of meeting him.”

“ I remember that you missed each other.”

“ Yes, we did. I understand from my wife that he will be here again in a day or two.”

“ He will be with us the day after tomorrow.”

“ I hope you will excuse my saying that it will be very desirable that we should miss each other again.” Clara felt that her face

became red with anger as she listened to Colonel Askerton's words. He spoke slowly, as was his custom, and without any of that violence of expression which his wife had used; but on that very account there was more, if possible, of meaning in his words than in hers. William Belton was her cousin, and such a speech as that which Colonel Askerton had made, spoken with deliberation and unaccompanied by any previous explanation, seemed to her almost to amount to insult. But as she did not know how to answer him at the spur of the moment, she remained silent. Then he continued, "You may be sure, Miss Amedroz, that I should not make so strange a request to you if I had not good reason for making it."

"I think it a very strange request."

"And nothing but a strong conviction of its propriety on my part would have induced me to make it."

"If you do not want to see my cousin, why cannot you avoid him without saying anything to me on the subject?"

“ Because you would not then have understood as thoroughly as I wish you to do why I kept out of his way. For my wife’s sake,—and for yours, if you will allow me to say so,—I do not wish to come to any open quarrel with him; but if we met, a quarrel would, I think, be inevitable. Mary has probably explained to you the nature of his offence against us?”

“ Mrs. Askerton has told me something as to which I am quite sure that she is mistaken.”

“ I will say nothing about that, as I have no wish at all to set you against your cousin. I will bid you good-night now as you are close at home.” Then he turned round and left her.

Clara, as she thought of all this, could not but call to mind her cousin’s remembrances about Miss Vigo and Mr. Berdmore. What if he made some inquiry as to the correctness of his old recollections? Nothing, she thought, could be more natural. And then she reflected that, in the ordinary way of the

world, persons feel none of that violent objection to the asking of questions about their antecedents which was now evinced by both Colonel and Mrs. Askerton. But of one thing she felt quite assured,—that her cousin, Will Belton, would make no inquiry which he ought not to make; and would make no improper use of any information which he might obtain.

CHAPTER V.

THE HEIR'S SECOND VISIT TO BELTON.

CLARA began to doubt whether any possible arrangement of the circumstances of her life could be regarded as fortunate. She was very fond, in a different degree and after a different fashion, of both Captain Aylmer and Mr. Belton. As regarded both, her position was now exactly what she herself would have wished. The man that she loved was betrothed to her, and the other man, whom she loved indeed also as a brother, was coming to her in that guise, —with the understanding that that was to be his position. And yet everything was going wrong! Her father, though he did not actually

say anything against Captain Aylmer, showed by a hundred little signs, of which he was a skilful master, that the Aylmer alliance was distasteful to him, and that he thought himself to be aggrieved in that his daughter would not marry her cousin; whereas, over at the cottage, there was a still more bitter feeling against Mr. Belton—a feeling so bitter, that it almost induced Clara to wish that her cousin was not coming to them.

But the cousin did come, and was driven up to the door in the gig from Taunton, just as had been the case on his previous visit. Then, however, he had come in the full daylight, and the hay-carts had been about, and all the prettiness and warmth of summer had been there; now it was 'mid-winter, and there had been some slight beginnings of snow, and the wind was moaning about the old tower, and the outside of the house looked very unpleasant from the hall-door. As it had become dusk in the afternoon, the old squire had been very careful in his orders as to preparations for Will's comfort,—as though Clara would have

forgotten all those things in the preoccupation of her mind, caused by the constancy of her thoughts towards Will's rival. He even went so far as to creep across the up-stairs landing-place to see that the fire was lighted in Will's room, this being the first time that he had left his chamber for many days,—and had given special orders as to the food which was to be prepared for Will's dinner,—in a very different spirit from that which had dictated some former orders when Will was about to make his first visit, and when his coming had been regarded by the old man as a heartless, indelicate, and almost hostile proceeding.

“I wish I could go down to receive him,” said Mr. Amedroz, plaintively. “I hope he won't take it amiss.”

“You may be sure he won't do that.”

“Perhaps I can to-morrow.”

“Dear papa, you had better not think of it till the weather is milder.”

“Milder! how is it to get milder at this time of the year?”

“Of course he'll come up to you, papa.”

“He’s very good. I know he’s very good. No one else would do as much.”

Clara understood accurately what all this meant. Of course she was glad that her father should feel so kindly towards her cousin, and think so much of his coming; but every word said by the old man in praise of Will Belton implied an equal amount of dispraise as regarded Captain Aylmer, and contained a reproach against his daughter for having refused the former and accepted the latter.

Clara was in the hall when Belton arrived, and received him as he entered, enveloped in his damp great-coats. “It is so good of you to come in such weather,” she said.

“Nice seasonable weather, I call it,” he said. It was the same comfortable, hearty, satisfactory voice which had done so much towards making his way for him on his first arrival at Belton Castle. The voices to which Clara was most accustomed were querulous,—as though the world had been found by the owners of them to be but a bad place. But Belton’s voice seemed to speak of cheery days and

happy friends, and a general state of things which made life worth having. Nevertheless, forty-eight hours had not yet passed over his head since he was walking about London in such misery that he had almost cursed the hour in which he was born. His misery still remained with him, as black now as it had been then; and yet his voice was cheery. The sick birds, we are told, creep into holes, that they may die alone and unnoticed; and the wounded beasts hide themselves that their grief may not be seen of their fellows. A man has the same instinct to conceal the weakness of his sufferings; but, if he be a man, he hides it in his own heart, keeping it for solitude and the watches of the night, while to the outer world he carries a face on which his care has made no marks.

“You will be sorry to hear that papa is too ill to come down-stairs.”

“Is he, indeed? I am truly sorry. I had heard he was ill; but did not know he was so ill as that.”

“Perhaps he fancies himself weaker than he is.”

“We must try and cure him of that. I can see him, I hope?”

“Oh dear, yes. He is most anxious for you to go to him. As soon as ever you can come up-stairs I will take you. He had already stripped himself of his wrappings, and declaring himself ready, at once followed Clara to the squire’s room.

“I’m sorry, sir, to find you in this way,” he said.

“I’m very poorly, Will;—very,” said the squire, putting out his hand as though he were barely able to lift it above his knee. Now it certainly was the fact that half an hour before he had been walking across the passage.

“We must see if we can’t soon make you better among us,” said Will.

The squire shook his head with a slow, melancholy movement, not raising his eyes from the ground. “I don’t think you’ll ever see me much better, Will,” he said. And yet half an hour since he had been talking of being down in the dining-room on the next day. “I shan’t trouble you much longer,”

said the squire. "You'll soon have it all without paying rent for it."

This was very unpleasant, and almost frustrated Belton's attempts to be cheery. But he persevered nevertheless. "It'll be a long time yet before that day comes, sir."

"Ah; that's easily said. But never mind. Why should I want to remain when I shall have once seen her properly settled. I've nothing to live for except that she may have a home."

On this subject it was quite impossible that Belton should say anything. Clara was standing by him, and she, as he knew, was engaged to Captain Aylmer. So circumstanced, what could he say as to Clara's settlement in life? That something should be said between him and the old man, and something also between him and Clara, was a matter of course; but it was quite out of the question that he should discuss Clara's prospects in life in presence of them both together.

"Papa's illness makes him a little melancholy," said Clara.

“Of course,—of course. It always does,” said Will.

“I think he will be better when the weather becomes milder,” said Clara.

“I suppose I may be allowed to know how I feel myself,” said the squire. “But don’t keep Will up here when he wants his dinner. There; that’ll do. You’d better leave me now.” Then Will went out to his old room, and a quarter of an hour afterwards he found himself seated with Clara at the dinner-table; and a quarter of an hour after that the dinner was over, and they had both drawn their chairs to the fire.

Neither of them knew how to begin with the other. Clara was under no obligation to declare her engagement to her cousin, but yet she felt that it would be unhandsome in her not to do so. Had Will never made the mistake of wanting to marry her himself, she would have done so as a matter of course. Had she supposed him to cherish any intention of renewing that mistake she would have felt herself bound to tell him,—so that he

might save himself from unnecessary pain. But she gave him credit for no such intention, and yet she could not but remember that scene among the rocks. And then was she, or was she not, to say anything to him about the Askertons? With him also the difficulty was as great. He did not in truth believe that the tidings which he had heard from his friend the lawyer required corroboration; but yet it was necessary that he should know from herself that she had disposed of her hand;—and it was necessary also that he should say some word to her as to their future standing and friendship.

“You must be very anxious to see how your farm goes on,” said she.

He had not thought much of his agricultural venture at Belton for the last three or four days, and would hardly have been vexed had he been told that every head of cattle about the place had died of the murrain. Some general idea of the expediency of going on with a thing which he had commenced still actuated him; but it was the principle involved, and not the speculation itself, which interested him. But

he could not explain all this, and he therefore was driven to some cold agreement with her. "The farm!—you mean the stock. Yes; I shall go and have a look at them early to-morrow. I suppose they're all alive."

"Pudge says that they are doing uncommonly well." Pudge was a leading man among the Belton labourers, whom Will had hired to look after his concerns.

"That's all right. I dare say Pudge knows quite as much about it as I do."

"But the master's eye is everything."

"Pudge's eye is quite as good as mine; and probably much better, as he knows the country."

"You used to say that it was everything for a man to look after his own interests."

"And I do look after them. Pudge and I will go and have a look at every beast to-morrow, and I shall look very wise and pretend to know more about it than he does. In stock-farming the chief thing is not to have too many beasts. They used to say that half-stocking was whole profit, and whole-stocking

was half profit. If the animals have plenty to eat, and the rent isn't too high, they'll take care of their owner."

"But then there is so much illness."

"I always insure."

Clara perceived that the subject of the cattle didn't suit the present occasion. When he had before been at Belton he had liked nothing so much as talking about the cattle-sheds, and the land, and the kind of animals which would suit the place; but now the novelty of the thing was gone,—and the farmer did not wish to talk of his farm. In her anxiety to find a topic which would not be painful, she went from the cattle to the cow. "You can't think what a pet Bessy has been with us. And she seems to think that she is privileged to go everywhere, and do anything."

"I hope they have taken care that she has had winter food."

"Winter food! Why Pudge, and all the Pudges, and all the family in the house, and all your cattle would have to want, before Bessy would be allowed to miss a meal. Pudge

always says, with his sententious shake of the head, that the young squire was very particular about Bessy."

"Those Alderneys want a little care,—that's all."

Bessy was of no better service to Clara in her present difficulty than the less aristocratic herd of common cattle. There was a pause for a moment, and then she began again. "How did you leave your sister, Will?"

"Much the same as usual. I think she has borne the first of the cold weather better than she did last year."

"I do so wish that I knew her."

"Perhaps you will some day. But I don't suppose that you ever will."

"Why not?"

"It's not likely that you'll ever come to Plaistow now;—and Mary never leaves it except to go to my uncle's."

Clara instantly knew that he had heard of her engagement, though she could not imagine from what source he had heard it. There was something in the tone of his voice,—something

especially in the expression of that word "now," which told her that it must be so. "I should be so glad to go there if I could," she said, with that special hypocrisy which belongs to women, and is allowed to them; "but, of course, I cannot leave papa in his present state."

"And if you did leave him you would not go to Plaistow."

"Not unless you and Mary asked me."

"And you wouldn't if we did. How could you?"

"What do you mean, Will? It seems as though you were almost savage to me."

"Am I? Well;—I feel savage, but not to you."

"Nor to any one, I hope, belonging to me." She knew that it was all coming; that the whole subject of her future life must now be discussed; and she began to fear that the discussion might not be easy. But she did not know how to give it a direction. She feared that he would become angry, and yet she knew not why. He had accepted his own rejection tranquilly, and could hardly take it as an

offence that she should now be engaged to Captain Aylmer.

“Mr. Green has told me,” said he, “that you are going to be married.”

“How could Mr. Green have known?”

“He did know;—at least I suppose he knew, for he told me.”

“How very odd.”

“I suppose it is true?” Clara did not make any immediate answer, and then he repeated the question. “I suppose it is true?”

“It is true that I am engaged.”

“To Captain Aylmer?”

“Yes; to Captain Aylmer. You know that I had known him very long. I hope that you are not angry with me because I did not write and tell you. Strange as it may seem, seeing that you had heard it already, it is not a week yet since it was settled; and had I written to you, I could only have addressed my letter to you here.”

“I wasn't thinking about that. I didn't specially want you to write to me. What difference would it make?”

But I should have felt that I owed it to your kindness and your—regard for me.”

“My regard! What’s the use of regard?”

“You are not going to quarrel with me, Will, because—because—because—. If you had really been my brother, as you once said you would be, you could not but have approved of what I have done.”

“But I am not your brother.”

“Oh, Will; that sounds so cruel!”

“I am not your brother, and I have no right to approve or disapprove.”

“I will not say that I could make my engagement with Captain Aylmer dependent on your approval. It would not be fair to him to do so, and it would put me into a false position.”

“Have I asked you to make any such absurd sacrifice?”

“Listen to me, Will. I say that I could not do that. But, short of that, there is nothing I would not do to satisfy you. I think so much of your judgment and goodness, and so very much of your affection; I love

you so dearly, that——. Oh, Will, say a kind word to me!"

"A kind word; yes, but what sort of kindness?"

"You must know that Captain Aylmer——"

"Don't talk to me of Captain Aylmer. Have I said anything against him? Have I ventured to make any objection? Of course, I know his superiority to myself. I know that he is a man of the world, and that I am not; that he is educated, and that I am ignorant; that he has a position, and that I have none; that he has much to offer, and that I have nothing. Of course, I see the difference; but that does not make me comfortable."

"Will, I had learned to love him before I had ever seen you."

"Why didn't you tell me so, that I might have known there was no hope, and have gone away utterly,—out of the kingdom? If it was all settled then, why didn't you tell me, and save me from breaking my heart with false hopes?"

“Nothing was settled then. I hardly knew my own mind; but yet I loved him. There; cannot you understand it? Have I not told you enough?”

“Yes, I understand it.”

“And do you blame me?”

He paused awhile before he answered her. “No; I do not blame you. I suppose I must blame no one but myself. But you should bear with me. I was so happy, and now I am so wretched.”

There was nothing that she could say to comfort him. She had altogether mistaken the nature of the man's regard, and had even mistaken the very nature of the man. So much she now learned, and could tell herself that had she known him better she would either have prevented this second visit, or would have been careful that he should have learned the truth from herself before he came. Now she could only wait till he should again have got strength to hide his suffering under the veil of his own manliness.

“I have not a word to say against what you

are doing," he said at last; "not a word. But you will understand what I mean when I tell you that it is not likely that you will come to Plaistow."

"Some day, Will, when you have a wife of your own——"

"Very well; but we won't talk about that at present, if you please. When I have, things will be different. In the meantime your course and mine will be separate. You, I suppose, will be with him in London, while I shall be,—at the devil as likely as not."

"How can you speak to me in that way? Is that like being my brother?"

"I don't feel like being your brother. However, I beg your pardon, and now we will have done with it. Spilt milk can't be helped, and my milk pans have got themselves knocked over. That's all. Don't you think we ought to go up to your father again?"

On the following day Belton and Mr. Amedroz discussed the same subject, but the conversation went off very quietly. Will was determined not to exhibit his weakness before

the father as he had done before the daughter. When the squire, with a maundering voice, drawled out some expression of regret that his daughter's choice had not fallen in another place, Will was able to say that by-gones must be by-gones. He regretted it also, but that was now over. And when the squire endeavoured to say a few ill-natured words about Captain Aylmer, Will stopped him at once by asserting that the Captain was all that he ought to be.

“And it would have made me so happy to think that my daughter's child should come to live in his grandfather's old house,” murmured Mr. Amedroz.

“And there's no knowing that he mayn't do so yet,” said Will. “But all these things are so doubtful that a man is wrong to fix his happiness upon them.” After that he went out to ramble about the place, and before the third day was over Clara was able to perceive that, in spite of what he had said, he was as busy about the cattle as though his bread depended on them.

Nothing had been said as yet about the Askertons, and Clara had resolved that their name should not first be mentioned by her. Mrs. Askerton had prophesied that Will would have some communication to make about herself, and Clara would at any rate see whether her cousin would, of his own accord, introduce the subject. But three days passed by, and he had made no allusion to the cottage or its inhabitants. This in itself was singular, as the Askertons were the only local friends whom Clara knew, and as Belton had become personally acquainted with Mrs. Askerton. But such was the case; and when Mr. Amedroz once said something about Mrs. Askerton in the presence of both Clara and Belton, they both of them shrank from the subject in a manner that made Clara understand that any conversation about the Askertons was to be avoided. On the fourth day Clara saw Mrs. Askerton, but then Will Belton's name was not mentioned. There was therefore, among them all, a sense of some mystery which made them uncomfortable, and which seemed to admit of no solution.

Clara was more sure than ever that her cousin had made no inquiries that he should not have made, and that he would put no information that he might have to an improper use. But of such certainty on her part she could say nothing.

Three weeks passed by, and it seemed as though Belton's visit were to come to an end without any further open trouble. Now and then something was said about Captain Aylmer; but it was very little, and Belton made no further reference to his own feelings. It had come to be understood that his visit was to be limited to a month; and to both him and Clara the month wore itself away slowly, neither of them having much pleasure in the society of the other. The old squire came down-stairs once for an hour or two, and spent the whole time in bitter complaints. Everything was wrong, and everybody was ill-treating him. Even with Will he quarrelled, or did his best to quarrel, in regard to everything about the place, though at the same time he did not cease to grumble at his visitor for going away and

leaving him. Belton bore it all so well that the grumbling and quarrelling did not lead to much ; but it required all his good-humour and broad common sense to prevent serious troubles and misunderstanding.

During the period of her cousin's visit at Belton, Clara received two letters from Captain Aylmer, who was spending the Christmas holidays with his father and mother, and on the day previous to that of her cousin's departure there came a third. In neither of these letters was there much said about Sir Anthony, but they were all very full of Lady Aylmer. In the first he wrote with something of the personal enthusiasm of a lover, and therefore Clara hardly felt the little drawbacks to her happiness which were contained in certain innuendoes respecting Lady Aylmer's ideas, and Lady Aylmer's hopes, and Lady Aylmer's fears. Clara was not going to marry Lady Aylmer, and did not fear but that she could hold her own against any mother-in-law in the world when once they should be brought face to face. And as long as Captain Aylmer seemed to take

her part rather than that of his mother it was all very well. The second letter was more trying to her temper, as it contained one or two small morsels of advice as to conduct which had evidently originated with her ladyship. Now there is nothing, I take it, so irritating to an engaged young lady as counsel from her intended husband's mamma. An engaged young lady, if she be really in love, will take almost anything from her lover as long as she is sure that it comes altogether from himself. He may take what liberties he pleases with her dress. He may prescribe high church or low church, —if he be not, as is generally the case, in a condition to accept, rather than to give, prescriptions on that subject. He may order almost any course of reading,—providing that he supply the books. And he may even interfere with the style of dancing, and recommend or prohibit partners. But he may not thrust his mother down his future wife's throat. In answer to the second letter, Clara did not say much to show her sense of objection. Indeed she said nothing. But in saying nothing she

showed her objection, and Captain Aylmer understood it. Then came the third letter, and as it contained matter touching upon our story, it shall be given entire,—and I hope it may be taken by gentlemen about to marry as a fair specimen of the sort of letter they ought not to write to the girls of their hearts:—

“Aylmer Castle, 19th January, 186—.

“DEAREST CLARA,—I got your letter of the 16th yesterday, and was sorry you said nothing in reference to my mother’s ideas as to the house at Perivale. Of course she knew that I heard from you, and was disappointed when I was obliged to tell her that you had not alluded to the subject. She is very anxious about you, and, having now given her assent to our marriage, is of course desirous of knowing that her kindly feeling is reciprocated. I assured her that my own Clara was the last person to be remiss in such a matter, and reminded her that young ladies are seldom very careful in their mode of answering letters. Remember, therefore, that I am now your guarantee, and

send some message to relieve me from my liability.

“ When I told her of your father’s long illness, which she laments greatly, and of your cousin’s continued presence at Belton Castle, she seemed to think that Mr. Belton’s visit should not be prolonged. When I told her that he was your nearest relative, she remarked that cousins are the same as any other people,—which indeed they are. I know that my Clara will not suppose that I mean more by this than the words convey. Indeed I mean less. But not having the advantage of a mother of your own, you will not be sorry to know what are my mother’s opinions on matters which so nearly concern you.

“ And now I come to another subject, as to which what I shall say will surprise you very much. You know, I think, that my aunt Winterfield and I had some conversation about your neighbours, the Askertons; and you will remember that my aunt, whose ideas on such matters were always correct, was a little afraid that your father had not made

sufficient inquiry respecting them before he allowed them to settle near him as tenants. It now turns out that she is,—very far, indeed, from what she ought to be. My mother at first thought of writing to you about this; but she is a little fatigued, and at last resolved that under all the circumstances it might be as well that I should tell you. It seems that Mrs. Askerton was married before to a certain Captain Berdmore, and that she left her first husband during his lifetime under the protection of Colonel Askerton. I believe they, the Colonel and Mrs. Askerton, have been since married. Captain Berdmore died about four years ago in India, and it is probable that such a marriage has taken place. But under these circumstances, as Lady Aylmer says, you will at once perceive that all acquaintance between you and the lady should be brought to an end. Indeed, your own sense of what is becoming to you, either as an unmarried girl or as my future wife, or indeed as a woman at all, will at once make you feel that this must be so. I think,

if I were you, I would tell the whole to Mr. Amedroz ; but this I will leave to your own discretion. I can assure you that Lady Aylmer has full proof as to the truth of what I tell you.

“ I go up to London in February. I suppose I may hardly hope to see you before the recess in July or August ; but I trust that before that we shall have fixed the day when you will make me the happiest of men.

“ Yours, with truest affection,

“ F. F. AYLNER.”

It was a disagreeable, nasty letter from the first line to the last. There was not a word in it which did not grate against Clara's feelings,—not a thought expressed which did not give rise to fears as to her future happiness. But the information which it contained about the Askertons,—“ the communication,” as Mrs. Askerton herself would have called it,—made her for the moment almost forget Lady Aylmer and her insolence. Could this story be true ? And if true, how far would it

be imperative on her to take the hint, or rather obey the order which had been given her? What steps should she take to learn the truth? Then she remembered Mrs. Askerton's promise—"If you want to ask any questions, and will ask them of me, I will answer them." The communication, as to which Mrs. Askerton had prophesied, had now been made;—but it had been made, not by Will Belton, whom Mrs. Askerton had reviled, but by Captain Aylmer, whose praises Mrs. Askerton had so loudly sung. As Clara thought of this, she could not analyse her own feelings, which were not devoid of a certain triumph. She had known that Belton would not put on his armour to attack a woman. Captain Aylmer had done so, and she was hardly surprised at his doing it. Yet Captain Aylmer was the man she loved! Captain Aylmer was the man she had promised to marry. But, in truth, she hardly knew which was the man she loved!

This letter came on a Sunday morning, and on that day she and Belton went to church

together. On the following morning early he was to start for Taunton. At church they saw Mrs. Askerton, whose attendance there was not very frequent. It seemed, indeed, as though she had come with the express purpose of seeing Belton once during his visit. As they left the church she bowed to him, and that was all they saw of each other throughout the month that he remained in Somersetshire.

“Come to me to-morrow, Clara,” Mrs. Askerton said as they all passed through the village together. Clara muttered some reply, having not as yet made up her mind as to what her conduct must be. Early on the next morning Will Belton went away, and again Clara got up to give him his breakfast. On this occasion he had no thought of kissing her. He went away without having had a word said to him about Mrs. Askerton, and then Clara settled herself down to the work of deliberation. What should she do with reference to the communication that had been made to her by Captain Aylmer?

CHAPTER VI.

AYLMER PARK.

AYLMER PARK and the great house of the Aylmers together formed an important, and, as regarded in some minds, an imposing country residence. The park was large, including some three or four hundred acres, and was peopled, rather thinly, by aristocratic deer. It was surrounded by an aristocratic paling, and was entered, at three different points, by aristocratic lodges. The sheep were more numerous than the deer, because Sir Anthony, though he had a large income, was not in very easy circumstances. The ground was quite flat; and though there

were thin belts of trees, and some ornamental timber here and there, it was not well wooded. It had no special beauty of its own, and depended for its imposing qualities chiefly on its size, on its three sets of double lodges, and on its old-established character as an important family place in the county. The house was of stone, with a portico of Ionic columns which looked as though it hardly belonged of right to the edifice, and stretched itself out grandly, with two pretentious wings, which certainly gave it a just claim to be called a mansion. It required a great many servants to keep it in order, and the numerous servants required an experienced duenna, almost as grand in appearance as Lady Aylmer herself, to keep them in order. There was an open carriage and a close carriage, and a butler, and two footmen, and three gamekeepers, and four gardeners, and there was a coachman, and there were grooms, and sundry inferior men and boys about the place to do the work which the gardeners and gamekeepers and grooms did not choose to do themselves. And they

all became fat, and lazy, and stupid, and respectable together; so that, as the reader will at once perceive, Aylmer Park was kept up in the proper English style. Sir Anthony very often discussed with his steward the propriety of lessening the expenditure of his residence, and Lady Aylmer always attended and probably directed these discussions; but it was found that nothing could be done. Any attempt to remove a gamekeeper or a gardener would evidently throw the whole machinery of Aylmer Park out of gear. If retrenchment was necessary Aylmer Park must be abandoned, and the glory of the Aylmers must be allowed to pale. But things were not so bad as that with Sir Anthony. The gardeners, grooms, and gamekeepers were maintained; ten domestic servants sat down to four heavy meals in the servants' hall every day, and Lady Aylmer contented herself with receiving little or no company, and with stingy breakfasts and bad dinners for herself and her husband and daughter. By all this it must be seen that she did her duty as the

wife of an English country gentleman, and properly maintained his rank as a baronet.

He was a heavy man, over seventy years of age, much afflicted with gout, and given to no pursuit on earth which was available for his comfort. He had been a hunting man, and he had shot also; but not with that energy which induces a sportsman to carry on those amusements in opposition to the impediments of age. He had been, and still was, a county magistrate; but he had never been very successful in the justice-room, and now seldom troubled the county with his judicial incompetence. He had been fond of good dinners and good wine, and still, on occasions, would make attempts at enjoyment in that line; but the gout and Lady Aylmer together were too many for him, and he had but small opportunity for filling up the blanks of his existence out of the kitchen or cellar. He was a big man, with a broad chest, and a red face, and a quantity of white hair,—and was much given to abusing his servants. He took some pleasure in standing, with two sticks on the

top of the steps before his own front door, and railing at any one who came in his way. But he could not do this when Lady Aylmer was by; and his dependents, knowing his habits, had fallen into an ill-natured way of deserting the side of the house which he frequented. With his eldest son, Anthony Aylmer, he was not on very good terms; and though there was no positive quarrel, the heir did not often come to Aylmer Park. Of his son Frederic he was proud,—and the best days of his life were probably those which Captain Aylmer spent at the house. The table was then somewhat more generously spread, and this was an excuse for having up the special port in which he delighted. Altogether his life was not very attractive; and though he had been born to a baronetcy, and eight thousand a-year, and the possession of Aylmer Park, I do not think that he was, or had been, a happy man.

Lady Aylmer was more fortunate. She had occupations of which her husband knew nothing, and for which he was altogether unfit.

Though she could not succeed in making retrenchments, she could and did succeed in keeping the household books. Sir Anthony could only blow up the servants when they were thoughtless enough to come in his way, and in doing that was restricted by his wife's presence. But Lady Aylmer could get at them day and night. She had no gout to impede her progress about the house and grounds, and could make her way to places which the master never saw; and then she wrote many letters daily, whereas Sir Anthony hardly ever took a pen in his hand. And she knew the cottages of all the poor about the place, and knew also all their sins of omission and commission. She was driven out, too, every day, summer and winter, wet and dry, and consumed enormous packets of wool and worsted, which were sent to her monthly from York. And she had a companion in her daughter, whereas Sir Anthony had no companion. Wherever Lady Aylmer went Miss Aylmer went with her, and relieved what might otherwise have been the tedium of her

life. She had been a beauty on a large scale, and was still aware that she had much in her personal appearance which justified pride. She carried herself uprightly, with a commanding nose and broad forehead; and though the graces of her own hair had given way to a front, there was something even in the front which added to her dignity, if it did not make her a handsome woman.

Miss Aylmer, who was the eldest of the younger generation, and who was now gently descending from her fortieth year, lacked the strength of her mother's character, but admired her mother's ways, and followed Lady Aylmer in all things,—at a distance. She was very good,—as indeed was Lady Aylmer,—entertaining a high idea of duty, and aware that her own life admitted of but little self-indulgence. She had no pleasures, she incurred no expenses; and was quite alive to the fact that as Aylmer Park required a regiment of lazy, gormandizing servants to maintain its position in the county, the Aylmers themselves should not be lazy, and

should not gormandize. No one was more careful with her few shillings than Miss Aylmer. She had, indeed, abandoned a life's correspondence with an old friend because she would not pay the postage on letters to Italy. She knew that it was for the honour of the family that one of her brothers should sit in Parliament, and was quite willing to deny herself a new dress because sacrifices must be made to lessen electioneering expenses. She knew that it was her lot to be driven about slowly in a carriage with a livery servant before her and another behind her, and then eat a dinner which the cook-maid would despise. She was aware that it was her duty to be snubbed by her mother, and to encounter her father's ill-temper, and to submit to her brother's indifference, and to have, so to say, the slightest possible modicum of personal individuality. She knew that she had never attracted a man's love, and might hardly hope to make friends for the comfort of her coming age. But still she was contented, and felt that she had consolation for it all in the fact

that she was an Aylmer. She read many novels, and it cannot but be supposed that something of regret would steal over her as she remembered that nothing of the romance of life had ever, or could ever, come in her way. She wept over the loves of many women, though she had never been happy or unhappy in her own. She read of gaiety, though she never encountered it, and must have known that the world elsewhere was less dull than it was at Aylmer Park. But she took her life as it came, without a complaint, and prayed that God would make her humble in the high position to which it had pleased Him to call her. She hated Radicals, and thought that Essays and Reviews, and Bishop Colenso, came direct from the Evil One. She taught the little children in the parish, being specially urgent to them always to courtesy when they saw any of the family;—and was as ignorant, meek, and stupid a poor woman as you shall find anywhere in Europe.

It may be imagined that Captain Aylmer, who knew the comforts of his club and was

accustomed to life in London, would feel the dulness of the paternal roof to be almost unendurable. In truth, he was not very fond of Aylmer Park, but he was more gifted with patience than most men of his age and position, and was aware that it behoved him to keep the Fifth Commandment if he expected to have his own days prolonged in the land. He therefore made his visits periodically, and contented himself with clipping a few days at both ends from the length prescribed by family tradition, which his mother was desirous of exacting. September was always to be passed at Aylmer Park, because of the shooting. In September, indeed, the eldest son himself was wont to be there,—probably with a friend or two,—and the fat old servants bestirred themselves, and there was something of life about the place. At Christmas, Captain Aylmer was there as the only visitor, and Christmas was supposed to extend from the middle of December to the opening of Parliament. It must, however, be explained, that on the present occasion his visit had been a

matter of treaty and compromise. He had not gone to Aylmer Park at all till his mother had in some sort assented to his marriage with Clara Amedroz. To this Lady Aylmer had been very averse, and there had been many serious letters. Belinda Aylmer, the daughter of the house, had had a bad time in pleading her brother's cause,—and some very harsh words had been uttered;—but ultimately the matter had been arranged, and, as is usual in such contests, the mother had yielded to the son. Captain Aylmer had therefore gone down a few days before Christmas, with a righteous feeling that he owed much to his mother for her condescension, and almost prepared to make himself very disagreeable to Clara by way of atoning to his family for his folly in desiring to marry her.

Lady Aylmer was very plain-spoken on the subject of all Clara's shortcomings,—very plain-spoken, and very inquisitive. “She will never have one shilling, I suppose?” she said.

“Yes, ma'am.” Captain Aylmer always called his mother ma'am. “She will have

that fifteen hundred pounds that I told you of."

"That is to say, you will have back the money which you yourself have given her, Fred. I suppose that is the English of it?" Then Lady Aylmer raised her eyebrows and looked very wise.

"Just so, ma'am."

"You can't call that having anything of her own. In point of fact she is penniless."

"It is no good harping on that," said Captain Aylmer, somewhat sharply.

"Not in the least, my dear; no good at all. Of course you have looked it all in the face. You will be a poor man instead of a rich man, but you will have enough to live on,—that is if she doesn't have a large family;—which of course she will."

"I shall do very well, ma'am."

"You might do pretty well, I dare say, if you could live privately,—at Perivale, keeping up the old family house there, and having no expenses; but you'll find even that close enough with your seat in Parliament, and the

necessity there is that you should be half the year in London. Of course she won't go to London. She can't expect it. All that had better be made quite clear at once." Hence had come the letter about the house at Perivale, containing Lady Aylmer's advice on that subject, as to which Clara made no reply.

Lady Aylmer, though she had given in her assent, was still not altogether without hope. It might be possible that the two young people could be brought to see the folly and error of their ways before it would be too late; and that Lady Aylmer, by a judicious course of constant advice, might be instrumental in opening the eyes, if not of the lady, at any rate of the gentleman. She had great reliance on her own powers, and knew well that a falling drop will hollow a stone. Her son manifested no hot eagerness to complete his folly in a hurry, and to cut the throat of his prospects out of hand. Time, therefore, would be allowed to her, and she was a woman who could use time with patience. Having,

through her son, despatched her advice about the house at Perivale,—which simply amounted to this, that Clara should expressly state her willingness to live there alone whenever it might suit her husband to be in London or elsewhere,—she went to work on other points connected with the Amedroz family, and eventually succeeded in learning something very much like the truth as to poor Mrs Askerton and her troubles. At first she was so comfortably horror-stricken by the iniquity she had unravelled,—so delightfully shocked and astounded,—as to believe that the facts as they then stood would suffice to annul the match.

“You don’t tell me,” she said to Belinda, “that Frederic’s wife will have been the friend of such a woman as that!” And Lady Aylmer, sitting up-stairs with her household books before her, put up her great fat hands and her great fat arms, and shook her head,—front and all,—in most satisfactory dismay.

“But I suppose Clara did not know it.”

Belinda had considered it to be an act of charity to call Miss Amedroz Clara since the family consent had been given.

“Didn’t know it! They have been living in that sort of way that they must have been confidantes in everything. Besides, I always hold that a woman is responsible for her female friends.”

“I think if she consents to drop her at once,—that is, absolutely to make a promise that she will never speak to her again,—Frederic ought to take that as sufficient. That is, of course, mamma, unless she has had anything to do with it herself.”

“After this I don’t know how I’m to trust her. I don’t indeed. It seems to me that she has been so artful throughout. It has been a regular case of catching.”

“I suppose, of course, that she has been anxious to marry Frederic;—but perhaps that was natural.”

“Anxious;—look at her going there just when he had to meet his constituents. How young women can do such things passes me!

And how it is that men don't see it all, when it's going on just under their noses, I can't understand. And then her getting my poor dear sister to speak to him when she was dying! I didn't think your aunt would have been so weak." It will be thus seen that there was entire confidence on this subject between Lady Aylmer and her daughter.

We know what were the steps taken with reference to the discovery, and how the family were waiting for Clara's reply. Lady Aylmer, though in her words she attributed so much mean cunning to Miss Amedroz, still was disposed to believe that that lady would show rather a high spirit on this occasion; and trusted to that high spirit as the means for making the breach which she still hoped to accomplish. It had been intended,—or rather desired,—that Captain Aylmer's letter should have been much sharper and authoritative than he had really made it; but the mother could not write the letter herself, and had felt that to write in her own name would not have served to create anger on Clara's part against

her betrothed. But she had quite succeeded in inspiring her son with a feeling of horror against the iniquity of the Askertons. He was prepared to be [indignantly moral; and perhaps, — perhaps, — the misguided Clara might be silly enough to say a word for her lost friend! Such being the present position of affairs there was certainly ground for hope.

And now they were all waiting for Clara's answer. Lady Aylmer had well calculated the course of post, and knew that a letter might reach them by Wednesday morning. "Of course she will not write on Sunday," she had said to her son, "but you have a right to expect that not another day should go by." Captain Aylmer, who felt that they were putting Clara on her trial, shook his head impatiently, and made no immediate answer. Lady Aylmer, triumphantly feeling that she had the culprit on the hip, did not care to notice this. She was doing the best she could for his happiness,—as she had done for his health, when in days gone by she had administered to him his infantine rhubarb and

early senna ; but as she had never then expected him to like her doses, neither did she now expect that he should be well pleased at the remedial measures to which he was to be subjected.

No letter came on the Wednesday, nor did any come on the Thursday, and then it was thought by the ladies at the Park that the time had come for speaking a word or two. Belinda, at her mother's instance, began the attack, — not in her mother's presence, but when she only was with her brother.

“Isn't it odd, Frederic, that Clara shouldn't write about those people at Belton ?”

“Somersetshire is the other side of London, and letters take a long time.”

“But if she had written on Monday, her answer would have been here on Wednesday morning ; — indeed, you would have had it Tuesday evening, as mamma sent over to Whitby for the day mail letters.” Poor Belinda was a bad lieutenant, and displayed too much of her senior officer's tactics in thus showing how much calculation and how much

solicitude there had been as to the expected letter.

“If I am contented I suppose you may be,” said the brother.

“But it does seem to me to be so very important! If she hasn’t got your letter, you know, it would be so necessary that you should write again, so that the—the—the contamination should be stopped as soon as possible.” Captain Aylmer shook his head and walked away. He was, no doubt, prepared to be morally indignant,—morally very indignant,—at the Askerton iniquity; but he did not like the word contamination as applied to his future wife.

“Frederic,” said his mother, later on the same day,—when the hardly-used groom had returned from his futile afternoon’s inquiry at the neighbouring post-town,—“I think you should do something in this affair.”

“Do what, ma’am? Go off to Belton myself?”

“No, no. I certainly would not do that. In the first place it would be very inconvenient

to you, and in the next place it would not be fair upon us. I did not mean that at all. But I think that something should be done. She should be made to understand."

"You may be sure, ma'am, that she understands as well as anybody."

"I dare say she is clever enough at these kind of things."

"What kind of things?"

"Don't bite my nose off, Frederic, because I am anxious about your wife."

"What is it that you wish me to do? I have written to her, and can only wait for her answer."

"It may be that she feels a delicacy in writing to you on such a subject; though I own——. However, to make a long story short, if you like, I will write to her myself."

"I don't see that that would do any good. It would only give her offence."

"Give her offence, Frederic, to receive a letter from her future mother-in-law;—from me! Only think, Frederic, what you are saying."

“If she thought she was being bullied about this, she would turn rusty at once.”

“Turn rusty! What am I to think of a young lady who is prepared to turn rusty,—at once, too, because she is cautioned by the mother of the man she professes to love against an improper acquaintance,—against an acquaintance so very improper?” Lady Aylmer’s eloquence should have been heard to be appreciated. It is but tame to say that she raised her fat arms and fat hands, and wagged her front,—her front that was the more formidable as it was the old one, somewhat rough and dishevelled, which she was wont to wear in the morning. The emphasis of her words should have been heard, and the fitting solemnity of her action should have been seen. “If there were any doubt,” she continued to say, “but there is no doubt. There are the damning proofs.” There are certain words usually confined to the vocabularies of men, which women such as Lady Aylmer delight to use on special occasions, when strong circumstances demand strong

language. As she said this she put her hand below the table, pressing it apparently against her own august person ; but she was in truth indicating the position of a certain valuable correspondence, which was locked up in the drawer of her writing-table.

“ You can write if you like it, of course ; but I think you ought to wait a few more days.”

“ Very well, Frederic ; then I will wait. I will wait till Sunday. I do not wish to take any step of which you do not approve. If you have not heard by Sunday morning, then I will write to her—on Monday.”

On the Saturday afternoon life was becoming inexpressibly disagreeable to Captain Aylmer, and he began to meditate an escape from the Park. In spite of the agreement between him and his mother, which he understood to signify that nothing more was to be said as to Clara's wickedness, at any rate till Sunday after post-hour, Lady Aylmer had twice attacked him on the Saturday, and had expressed her opinion that affairs were in a

very frightful position. Belinda went about the house in melancholy guise, with her eyes rarely lifted off the ground, as though she were prophetically weeping the utter ruin of her brother's respectability. And even Sir Anthony had raised his eyes and shaken his head, when, on opening the post-bag at the breakfast-table, — an operation which was always performed by Lady Aylmer in person, — her ladyship had exclaimed, "Again no letter!" Then Captain Aylmer thought that he would fly, and resolved that, in the event of such flight, he would give special orders as to the re-direction of his own letters from the post-office at Whitby.

That evening, after dinner, as soon as his mother and sister had left the room, he began the subject with his father. "I think I shall go up to town on Monday, sir," said he.

"So soon as that. I thought you were to stop till the 9th."

"There are things I must see to in London, and I believe I had better go at once."

“Your mother will be greatly disappointed.”

“I shall be sorry for that;—but business is business, you know.” Then the father filled his glass and passed the bottle. He himself did not at all like the idea of his son’s going before the appointed time, but he did not say a word of himself. He looked at the red-hot coals, and a hazy glimmer of a thought passed through his mind, that he too would escape from Aylmer Park,—if it were possible.

“If you’ll allow me, I’ll take the dog-cart over to Whitby on Monday, for the express train.”

“You can do that certainly, but——”

“Sir?”

“Have you spoken to your mother yet?”

“Not yet. I will to-night.”

“I think she’ll be a little angry, Fred.”

There was a sudden tone of subdued confidence in the old man’s voice as he made this suggestion, which, though it was by no means a customary tone, his son well understood. “Don’t you think she will be;—eh, a little?”

“ She shouldn’t go on as she does with me about Clara,” said the Captain.

“ Ah,—I supposed there was something of that. Are you drinking port?”

“ Of course I know that she means all that is good,” said the son, passing back the bottle.

“ Oh yes ;—she means all that is good.”

“ She is the best mother in the world.”

“ You may say that, Fred ;—and the best wife.”

“ But if she can’t have her own way altogether——” Then the son paused, and the father shook his head.

“ Of course she likes to have her own way,” said Sir Anthony.

“ It’s all very well in some things.”

“ Yes ;—it’s very well in some things.”

“ But there are things which a man must decide for himself.”

“ I suppose there are,” said Sir Anthony, not venturing to think what those things might be as regarded himself.

“ Now, with reference to marrying——”

“I don't know what you want with marrying at all, Fred. You ought to be very happy as you are. By heavens, I don't know any one who ought to be happier. If I were you, I know——”

“But you see, sir, that's all settled.”

“If it's all settled, I suppose there's an end of it.”

“It's no good my mother nagging at one.”

“My dear boy, she's been nagging at me, as you call it, for forty years. That's her way. The best woman in the world, as we were saying;—but that's her way. And it's the way with most of them. They can do anything if they keep it up;—anything. The best thing is to bear it if you've got it to bear. But why on earth you should go and marry, seeing that you're not the eldest son, and that you've got everything on earth that you want as a bachelor, I can't understand. I can't indeed, Fred. By heaven, I can't!” Then Sir Anthony gave a long sigh, and sat musing awhile, thinking of the club in London to which he belonged, but which he never entered;—of

the old days in which he had been master of a bedroom near St. James's Street,—of his old friends whom he never saw now, and of whom he never heard, except as one and another, year after year, shuffled away from their wives to that world in which there is no marrying or giving in marriage. “Ah, well,” he said, “I suppose we may as well go into the drawing-room. If it is settled, I suppose it is settled. But it really seems to me that your mother is trying to do the best she can for you. It really does.”

Captain Aylmer did not say anything to his mother that night as to his going, but as he thought of his prospects in the solitude of his bedroom, he felt really grateful to his father for the solicitude which Sir Anthony had displayed on his behalf. It was not often that he received paternal counsel, but now that it had come he acknowledged its value. That Clara Amedroz was a self-willed woman he thought that he was aware. She was self-reliant, at any rate,—and by no means ready to succumb with that pretty feminine docility which he would like to have

seen her evince. He certainly would not wish to be "nagged" by his wife. Indeed he knew himself well enough to assure himself that he would not stand it for a day. In his own house he would be master, and if there came tempests he would rule them. He could at least promise himself that. As his mother had been strong, so had his father been weak. But he had,—as he felt thankful in knowing,—inherited his mother's strength rather than his father's weakness. But, for all that, why have a tempest to rule at all? Even though a man do rule his domestic tempests, he cannot have a very quiet house with them. Then again he remembered how very easily Clara had been won. He wished to be just to all men and women, and to Clara among the number. He desired even to be generous to her,—with a moderate generosity. But above all things he desired not to be duped. What if Clara had in truth instigated her aunt to that deathbed scene, as his mother had more than once suggested! He did not believe it. He was sure that it had not been so. But what if it were so? His

desire to be generous and trusting was moderate ; —but his desire not to be cheated, not to be deceived, was immoderate. Upon the whole might it not be well for him to wait a little longer, and ascertain how Clara really intended to behave herself in this emergency of the Askertons ? Perhaps, after all, his mother might be right.

On the Sunday the expected letter came ;— but before its contents are made known, it will be well that we should go back to Belton, and see what was done by Clara in reference to the tidings which her lover had sent her.

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. ASKERTON'S STORY.

WHEN Clara received the letter from Captain Aylmer on which so much is supposed to hang, she made up her mind to say nothing of it to any one,—not to think of it if she could avoid thinking of it,—till her cousin should have left her. She could not mention it to him; for, though there was no one from whom she would sooner have asked advice than from him, even on so delicate a matter as this, she could not do so in the present case, as her informant was her cousin's successful rival. When, therefore, Mrs. Askerton on leaving the church had spoken some customary word to Clara, begging

her to come to the cottage on the following day, Clara had been unable to answer,—not having as yet made up her mind whether she would or would not go to the cottage again. Of course the idea of consulting her father occurred to her,—or rather the idea of telling him; but any such telling would lead to some advice from him which she would find it difficult to obey, and to which she would be unable to trust. And, moreover, why should she repeat this evil story against her neighbours?

She had a long morning by herself after Will had started, and then she endeavoured to arrange her thoughts and lay down for herself a line of conduct. Presuming this story to be true, to what did it amount? It certainly amounted to very much. If, in truth, this woman had left her own husband and gone away to live with another man, she had by doing so,—at any rate while she was doing so,—fallen in such a way as to make herself unfit for the society of an unmarried young woman who meant to keep her name unblemished

before the world. Clara would not attempt any further unravelling of the case, even in her own mind;—but on that point she could not allow herself to have a doubt. Without condemning the unhappy victim, she understood well that she would owe it to all those who held her dear, if not to herself, to eschew any close intimacy with one in such a position. The rules of the world were too plainly written to allow her to guide herself by any special judgment of her own in such a matter. But if this friend of hers,—having been thus unfortunate,—had since redeemed, or in part redeemed, her position by a second marriage, would it be then imperative upon her to remember the past for ever, and to declare that the stain was indelible? Clara felt that with a previous knowledge of such a story she would probably have avoided any intimacy with Mrs. Askerton. She would then have been justified in choosing whether such intimacy should or should not exist, and would so have chosen out of deference to the world's opinion. But now it was too late for that. Mrs. Askerton had

for years been her friend; and Clara had to ask herself *this* question; was it now needful, —did her own feminine purity demand,—that she should throw her friend over because in past years her life had been tainted by misconduct.

It was clear enough at any rate that this was expected from her,—nay, imperatively demanded by him who was to be her lord,—by him to whom her future obedience would be due. Whatever might be her immediate decision, he would have a right to call upon her to be guided by his judgment as soon as she would become his wife. And indeed, she felt that he had such right now,—unless she should decide that no such right should be his, now or ever. It was still within her power to say that she could not submit herself to such a rule as his,—but having received his commands she must do that or obey them. Then she declared to herself, not following the matter out logically, but urged to her decision by sudden impulse, that at any rate she would not obey Lady Aylmer. She would have

nothing to do, in any such matter, with Lady Aylmer. Lady Aylmer should be no god to her. That question about the house at Perivale had been very painful to her. She felt that she could have endured the dreary solitude at Perivale without complaint, if, after her marriage, her husband's circumstances had made such a mode of living expedient. But to have been asked to pledge her consent to such a life before her marriage, to feel that he was bargaining for the privilege of being rid of her, to know that the Aylmer people were arranging that he, if he would marry her, should be as little troubled with his wife as possible;—all this had been very grievous to her. She had tried to console herself by the conviction that Lady Aylmer,—not Frederic,—had been the sinner; but even in that consolation there had been the terrible flaw that the words had come to her written by Frederic's hand. Could Will Belton have written such a letter to his future wife?

In her present emergency she must be guided by her own judgment or her own

instincts,—not by any edicts from Aylmer Park! If in what she might do she should encounter the condemnation of Captain Aylmer, she would answer him,—she would be driven to answer him,—by counter-condemnation of him and his mother. Let it be so. Anything would be better than a mean, truckling subservience to the imperious mistress of Aylmer Park.

But what should she do as regarded Mrs. Askerton? That the story was true she was beginning to believe. That there was some such history was made certain to her by the promise which Mrs. Askerton had given her.

“If you want to ask any questions, and will ask them of me, I will answer them.” Such a promise would not have been volunteered unless there was something special to be told. It would be best, perhaps, to demand from Mrs. Askerton the fulfilment of this promise. But then in doing so she must own from whence her information had come. Mrs. Askerton had told her that the “communication” would be made by her cousin Will.

Her cousin Will had gone away without a word of Mrs. Askerton, and now the "communication" had come from Captain Aylmer!

The Monday and Tuesday were rainy days, and the rain was some excuse for her not going to the cottage. On the Wednesday her father was ill, and his illness made a further excuse for her remaining at home. But on the Wednesday evening there came a note to her from Mrs. Askerton. "You naughty girl, why do you not come to me? Colonel Askerton has been away since yesterday morning, and I am forgetting the sound of my own voice. I did not trouble you when your divine cousin was here,—for reasons; but unless you come to me now I shall think that his divinity has prevailed. Colonel Askerton is in Ireland, about some property, and will not be back till next week."

Clara sent back a promise by the messenger, and on the following morning she put on her hat and shawl, and started on her dreaded task. When she left the house she had not even yet quite made up her mind what she would

do. At first she put her lover's letter into her pocket, so that she might have it for reference; but, on second thoughts, she replaced it in her desk, dreading lest she might be persuaded into showing or reading some part of it. There had come a sharp frost after the rain, and the ground was hard and dry. In order that she might gain some further last moment for thinking, she walked round, up among the rocks, instead of going straight to the cottage; and for a moment,—though the air was sharp with frost,—she sat upon the stone where she had been seated when her cousin Will blurted out the misfortune of his heart. She sat there on purpose that she might think of him, and recall his figure, and the tones of his voice, and the look of his eyes, and the gesture of his face. What a man he was;—so tender, yet so strong; so thoughtful of others, and yet so self-sufficient! She had, unconsciously, imputed to him one fault, that he had loved and then forgotten his love;—unconsciously, for she had tried to think that this was a virtue rather than a fault;—but now,—with a full

knowledge of what she was doing, but without any intention of doing it,—she acquitted him of that one fault. Now that she could acquit him, she owned that it would have been a fault. To have loved, and so soon to have forgotten it! No; he had loved her truly, and alas! he was one who could not be made to forget it. Then she went on to the cottage, exercising her thoughts rather on the contrast between the two men than on the subject to which she should have applied them.

“So you have come at last!” said Mrs. Askerton. “Till I got your message I thought there was to be some dreadful misfortune.”

“What misfortune?”

“Something dreadful! One often anticipates something very bad without exactly knowing what. At least, I do. I am always expecting a catastrophe;—when I am alone that is;—and then I am so often alone.”

“That simply means low spirits, I suppose?”

“It's more than that, my dear.”

“Not much more, I take it.”

“Once when we were in India we lived close to the powder magazine, and we were always expecting to be blown up. You never lived near a powder magazine.”

“No, never;—unless there’s one at Belton. But I should have thought that was exciting.”

“And then there was the gentleman who always had the sword hanging over him by the horse’s hair.”

“What do you mean, Mrs. Askerton?”

“Don’t look so innocent, Clara. You know what I mean. What were the results at last of your cousin’s diligence as a detective officer?”

“Mrs. Askerton, you wrong my cousin greatly. He never once mentioned your name while he was with us. He did not make a single allusion to you, or to Colonel Askerton, or to the cottage.”

“He did not?”

“Never once.”

“Then I beg his pardon. But not the less has he been busy making inquiries.”

“But why should you say that there is

a powder magazine, or a sword hanging over your head?"

"Ah, why?"

Here was the subject ready opened to her hand, and yet Clara did not know how to go on with it. It seemed to her now that it would have been easier for her to commence it, if Mrs. Askerton had made no commencement herself. As it was, she knew not how to introduce the subject of Captain Aylmer's letter, and was almost inclined to wait, thinking that Mrs. Askerton might tell her own story without any such introduction. But nothing of the kind was forthcoming. Mrs. Askerton began to talk of the frost, and then went on to abuse Ireland, complaining of the hardship her husband endured in being forced to go thither in winter to look after his tenants.

"What did you mean," said Clara, at last, "by the sword hanging over your head?"

"I think I told you what I meant pretty plainly. If you did not understand me I cannot tell you more plainly."

“It is odd that you should say so much, and not wish to say more.”

“Ah! — you are making your inquiries now.”

“In my place would not you do so too? How can I help it when you talked of a sword. Of course you make me ask what the sword is.”

“And am I bound to satisfy your curiosity?”

“You told me, just before my cousin came here, that if I asked any question you would answer me.”

“And I am to understand that you are asking such a question now?”

“Yes;—if it will not offend you.”

“But what if it will offend me,—offend me greatly? Who likes to be inquired into?”

“But you courted such inquiry from me.”

“No, Clara, I did not do that. I’ll tell you what I did. I gave you to understand that if it was needful that you should hear about me and my antecedents,—certain matters as to which Mr. Belton had been inquiring into

in a manner that I thought to be most unjustifiable,—I would tell you that story.”

“ And do so without being angry with me for asking.”

“ I meant, of course, that I would not make it a ground for quarrelling with you. If I wished to tell you I could do so without any inquiry.”

“ I have sometimes thought that you did wish to tell me.”

“ Sometimes I have,—almost.”

“ But you have no such wish now ?”

“ Can't you understand? It may well be that one so much alone as I am,—living here without a female friend, or even acquaintance, except yourself,—should often feel a longing for that comfort which full confidence between us would give me.”

“ Then why not——”

“ Stop a moment. Can't you understand that I may feel this, and yet entertain the greatest horror against inquiry? We all like to tell our own sorrows, but who likes to be inquired into? Many a woman burns to

make a full confession, who would be as mute as death before a policeman.”

“I am no policeman.”

“But you are determined to ask a policeman’s questions?”

To this Clara made no immediate reply. She felt that she was acting almost falsely in going on with such questions, while she was in fact aware of all the circumstances which Mrs. Askerton could tell;—but she did not know how to declare her knowledge and to explain it. She sincerely wished that Mrs. Askerton should be made acquainted with the truth; but she had fallen into a line of conversation which did not make her own task easy. But the idea of her own hypocrisy was distressing to her, and she rushed at the difficulty with hurried, eager words, resolving that, at any rate, there should be no longer any doubt between them.

“Mrs. Askerton,” she said, “I know it all. There is nothing for you to tell. I know what the sword is.”

“What is it that you know?”

“That you were married long ago to—Mr. Berdmore.”

“Then Mr. Belton did do me the honour of talking about me when he was here?” As she said this she rose from her chair, and stood before Clara with flashing eyes.

“Not a word. He never mentioned your name, or the name of any one belonging to you. I have heard it from another.”

“From what other?”

“I do not know that that signifies,—but I have learned it.”

“Well;—and what next?”

“I do not know what next. As so much has been told me, and as you had said that I might ask you, I have come to you, yourself. I shall believe your own story more thoroughly from yourself than from any other teller.”

“And suppose I refuse to answer you?”

“Then I can say nothing further.”

“And what will you do?”

“Ah;—that I do not know. But you are harsh to me, while I am longing to be kind to you. Can you not see that this

has been all forced upon me,—partly by yourself?”

“And the other part;—who has forced that upon you? Who is your informant? If you mean to be generous, be generous altogether. Is it a man or a woman that has taken the trouble to rip up old sorrows that my name may be blackened? But what matters? There;—I was married to Captain Berdmore. I left him, and went away with my present husband. For three years I was a man’s mistress, and not his wife. When that poor creature died we were married, and then came here. Now you know it all;—all;—all,—though doubtless your informant has made a better story of it. After that, perhaps, I have been very wicked to sully the air you breathe by my presence.”

“Why do you say that,—to me?”

“But no;—you do not know it all. No one can ever know it all. No one can ever know how I suffered before I was driven to escape, or how good to me has been he who—
who—~~who~~——” Then she turned her back

upon Clara, and, walking off to the window, stood there, hiding the tears which clouded her eyes, and concealing the sobs which choked her utterance.

For some moments,—for a space which seemed long to both of them,—Clara kept her seat in silence. She hardly dared to speak, and though she longed to show her sympathy, she knew not what to say. At last she too rose and followed the other to the window. She uttered no words, however, but gently putting her arm around Mrs. Askerton's waist, stood there close to her, looking out upon the cold wintry flower-beds,—not venturing to turn her eyes upon her companion. The motion of her arm was at first very gentle, but after a while she pressed it closer, and thus by degrees drew her friend to her with an eager, warm, and enduring pressure. Mrs. Askerton made some little effort towards repelling her, some faint motion of resistance; but as the embrace became warmer the poor woman yielded herself to it, and allowed her face to fall upon Clara's shoulder. So they stood,

speaking no word, making no attempt to rid themselves of the tears which were blinding their eyes, but gazing out through the moisture on the bleak wintry scene before them. Clara's mind was the more active at the moment, for she was resolving that in this episode of her life she would accept no lesson whatever from Lady Aylmer's teaching;—no, nor any lesson whatever from the teaching of any Aylmer in existence. And as for the world's rules, she would fit herself to them as best she could; but no such fitting should drive her to the unwomanly cruelty of deserting this woman whom she had known and loved,—and whom she now loved with a fervour which she had never before felt towards her.

“You have heard it all now,” said Mrs. Askerton at last.

“And is it not better so?”

“Ah;—I do not know. How should I know?”

“Do you not know?” And as she spoke Clara pressed her arm still closer. “Do you not know yet?” Then, turning herself half

round, she clasped the other woman full in her arms, and kissed her forehead and her lips.

“Do you not know yet?”

“But you will go away, and people will tell you that you are wrong.”

“What people?” said Clara, thinking as she spoke of the whole family at Aylmer Park.

“Your husband will tell you so.”

“I have no husband,—as yet,—to order me what to think or what not to think.”

“No;—not quite as yet. But you will tell him all this.”

“He knows it. It was he who told me.”

“What!—Captain Aylmer?”

“Yes; Captain Aylmer.”

“And what did he say?”

“Never mind. Captain Aylmer is not my husband,—not as yet. If he takes me, he must take me as I am, not as he might possibly have wished me to be. Lady Aylmer——”

“And does Lady Aylmer know it?”

“Yes. Lady Aylmer is one of those hard, severe women who never forgive.”

“ Ah, I see it all now. I understand it all. Clara, you must forget me, and come here no more. You shall not be ruined because you are generous.”

“ Ruined! If Lady Aylmer’s displeasure can ruin me, I must put up with ruin. I will not accept her for my guide. I am too old, and have had my own way too long. Do not let that thought trouble you. In this matter I shall judge for myself. I have judged for myself already.”

“ And your father?”

“ Papa knows nothing of it.”

“ But you will tell him?”

“ I do not know. Poor papa is very ill. If he were well I would tell him, and he would think as I do.”

“ And your cousin?”

“ You say that he has heard it all.”

“ I think so. Do you know that I remembered him the first moment that I saw him. But what could I do? When you mentioned to me my old name, my real name, how could I be honest? I have been driven

to do that which has made honesty to me impossible. My life has been a lie; and yet how could I help it? I must live somewhere,—and how could I live anywhere without deceit?”

“And yet that is so sad.”

“Sad indeed! But what could I do? Of course I was wrong in the beginning. Though how am I to regret it, when it has given me such a husband as I have? Ah;—if you could know it all, I think,—I think you would forgive me.”

Then by degrees she told it all, and Clara was there for hours listening to her story. The reader will not care to hear more of it than he has heard. Nor would Clara have desired any closer revelation; but as it is often difficult to obtain a confidence, so is it impossible to stop it in the midst of its effusion. Mrs. Askerton told the history of her life,—of her first foolish engagement, her belief, her half-belief, in the man's reformation, of the miseries which resulted from his vices, of her escape and shame, of her welcome widowhood,

and of her second marriage. And as she told it, she paused at every point to insist on the goodness of him who was now her husband. "I shall tell him this," she said at last, "as I do everything; and then he will know that I have in truth got a friend."

She asked again and again about Mr. Belton, but Clara could only tell her that she knew nothing of her cousin's knowledge. Will might have heard it all, but if so he had kept his information to himself.

"And now what shall you do?" Mrs. Askerton asked of Clara, at length prepared to go.

"Do? in what way? I shall do nothing."

"But you will write to Captain Aylmer?"

"Yes;—I shall write to him."

"And about this?"

"Yes;—I suppose I must write to him."

"And what will you say?"

"That I cannot tell. I wish I knew what to say. If it were to his mother I could write my letter easily enough."

"And what would you say to her?"

"I would tell her that I was responsible for

my own friends. But I must go now. Papa will complain that I am so long away." Then there was another embrace, and at last Clara found her way out of the house and was alone again in the park.

She clearly acknowledged to herself that she had a great difficulty before her. She had committed herself altogether to Mrs. Askerton, and could no longer entertain any thought of obeying the very plainly expressed commands which Captain Aylmer had given her. The story as told by Captain Aylmer had been true throughout; but, in the teeth of that truth she intended to maintain her acquaintance with Mrs. Askerton. From that there was now no escape. She had been carried away by impulse in what she had done and said at the cottage, but she could not bring herself to regret it. She could not believe that it was her duty to throw over and abandon a woman whom she loved, because that woman had once, in her dire extremity, fallen away from the path of virtue. But how was she to write the letter?

When she reached her father he complained

of her absence, and almost scolded her for having been so long at the cottage. "I cannot see," said he, "what you find in that woman to make so much of her."

"She is the only neighbour I have, papa."

"And better none than her, if all that people say of her is true."

"All that people say is never true, papa."

"There is no smoke without fire. I am not at all sure that it's good for you to be so much with her."

"Oh, papa,—don't treat me like a child."

"And I'm sure it's not good for me that you should be so much away. For anything I have seen of you all day you might have been at Perivale. But you are going soon, altogether, so I suppose I may as well make up my mind to it."

"I'm not going for a long time yet, papa."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that there's nothing to take me away from here at present."

"You are engaged to be married."

"But it will be a long engagement. It is

one of those engagements in which neither party is very anxious for an immediate change." There was something bitter in Clara's tone as she said this, which the old man perceived, but could only half understand. Clara remained with him then for the rest of the day, going down-stairs for five minutes, to her dinner, and then returning to him and reading aloud while he dozed. Her winter evenings at Belton Castle were not very bright, but she was used to them and made no complaint.

When she left her father for the night she got out her desk and prepared herself for her letter to her lover. She was determined that it should be finished that night before she went to bed. And it was so finished; though the writing of it gave her much labour, and occupied her till the late hours had come upon her. When completed it was as follows :—

“Belton Castle, Thursday Night.

“DEAR FREDERIC,—I received your letter last Sunday, but I could not answer it sooner, as it required much consideration, and also

some information which I have only obtained to-day. About the plan of living at Perivale I will not say much now, as my mind is so full of other things. I think, however, I may promise that I will never make any needless difficulty as to your plans. My cousin Will left us on Monday, so your mother need not have any further anxiety on that head. It does papa good to have him here, and for that reason I am sorry that he has gone. I can assure you that I don't think what you said about him meant anything at all particular. Will is my nearest cousin, and of course you would be glad that I should like him,—which I do, very much.

“And now about the other subject, which I own has distressed me, as you supposed it would;—I mean about Mrs. Askerton. I find it very difficult in your letter to divide what comes from your mother and what from yourself. Of course I want to make the division, as every word from you has great weight with me. At present I don't know Lady Aylmer personally, and I cannot think of her as I do of you.

Indeed, were I to know her ever so well, I could not have the same deference for her that I have for the man who is to be my husband. I only say this, as I fear that Lady Aylmer and I may not perhaps agree about Mrs. Askerton.

“ I find that your story about Mrs. Askerton is in the main true. But the person who told it you does not seem to have known any of the provocations which she received. She was very badly treated by Captain Berdmore, who, I am afraid, was a terrible drunkard ; and at last she found it impossible to stay with him. So she went away. I cannot tell you how horrid it all was, but I am sure that if I could make you understand it, it would go a long way in inducing you to excuse her. She was married to Colonel Askerton as soon as Captain Berdmore died, and this took place before she came to Belton. I hope you will remember that. It all occurred out in India, and I really hardly know what business we have to inquire about it now.

“ At any rate, as I have been acquainted with her a long time, and very intimately, and

as I am sure that she has repented of anything that has been wrong, I do not think that I ought to quarrel with her now. Indeed I have promised her that I will not. I think I owe it you to tell you the whole truth, and that is the truth.

“Pray give my regards to your mother, and tell her that I am sure she would judge differently if she were in my place. This poor woman has no other friend here; and who am I, that I should take upon myself to condemn her? I cannot do it. Dear Frederic, pray do not be angry with me for asserting my own will in this matter. I think you would wish me to have an opinion of my own. In my present position I am bound to have one, as I am, as yet, responsible for what I do myself. I shall be very, very sorry, if I find that you differ from me; but still I cannot be made to think that I am wrong. I wish you were here, that we might talk it over together, as I think that in that case you would agree with me.

“If you can manage to come to us at Easter,

or any other time when Parliament does not keep you in London, we shall be so delighted to see you.

“Dear Frederic,

“Yours very affectionately,

“CLARA AMEDROZ.”

CHAPTER VIII.

MISS AMEDROZ HAS ANOTHER CHANCE.

It was on a Sunday morning that Clara's letter reached Aylmer Park, and Frederic Aylmer found it on his plate as he took his place at the breakfast-table. Domestic habits at Aylmer Park had grown with the growth of years till they had become adamantine, and domestic habits required prayers every morning at a quarter before nine o'clock. At twenty minutes before nine Lady Aylmer would always be in the dining-room to make the tea and open the post-bag, and as she was always there alone, she knew more about other people's letters than other people ever knew about hers. When these operations were over she rang the bell, and the servants of the family, who by

that time had already formed themselves into line in the hall, would march in, and settle themselves on benches prepared for them near the side-board,—which benches were afterwards carried away by the retiring procession. Lady Aylmer herself always read prayers, as Sir Anthony never appeared till the middle of breakfast. Belinda would usually come down in a scurry as she heard her mother's bell, in such a way as to put the army in the hall to some confusion; but Frederic Aylmer, when he was at home, rarely entered the room till after the service was over. At Perivale no doubt he was more strict in his conduct; but then at Perivale he had special interests and influences which were wanting to him at Aylmer Park. During those five minutes Lady Aylmer would deal round the letters to the several plates of the inmates of her house,—not without looking at the post-office marks upon them; and on this occasion she had dealt a letter from Clara to her son.

The arrival of the letter was announced to Frederic Aylmer before he took his seat.

“Frederic,” said her ladyship, in her most portentous voice, “I am glad to say that at last there is a letter from Belton.”

He made no immediate reply, but making his way slowly to his place, took up the little packet, turned it over in his hand, and then put it into his pocket. Having done this, he began very slowly with his tea and egg. For three minutes his mother was contented to make, or to pretend to make, some effort in the same direction. Then her impatience became too much for her, and she began to question him.

“Will you not read it, Frederic?”

“Of course I shall, ma’am.”

“But why not do so now, when you know how anxious we are?”

“There are letters which one would sooner read in private.”

“But when a matter is of so much importance——,” said Belinda.

“The importance, Bel, is to me, and not to you,” said her brother.

“All we want to know is,” continued the sister, “that she promises to be guided by you

in this matter; and of course we feel quite sure that she will."

"If you are quite sure that must be sufficient for you."

"I really think you need not quarrel with your sister," said Lady Aylmer, "because she is anxious as to the—the respectability, I must say, for there is no other word, of a young lady whom you propose to make your wife. I can assure you that I am very anxious myself,—very anxious indeed."

Captain Aylmer made no answer to this, but he did not take the letter from his pocket. He drank his tea in silence, and in silence sent up his cup to be refilled. In silence also was it returned to him. He eat his two eggs and his three bits of toast, according to his custom, and when he had finished, sat out his three or four minutes as was usual. Then he got up to retire to his room, with the envelope still unbroken in his pocket.

"You will go to church with us, I suppose?" said Lady Aylmer.

"I won't promise, ma'am; but if I do, I'll

walk across the park,—so that you need not wait for me.”

Then both the mother and sister knew that the member for Perivale did not intend to go to church on that occasion. To morning service Sir Anthony always went, the habits of Aylmer Park having in them more of adamant in reference to him than they had as regarded his son.

When the father, mother, and daughter returned, Captain Aylmer had read his letter, and had, after doing so, received further tidings from Belton Castle,—further tidings which for the moment prevented the necessity of any reference to the letter, and almost drove it from his own thoughts. When his mother entered the library he was standing before the fire with a scrap of paper in his hand.

“Since you have been at church there has come a telegraphic message,” he said.

“What is it, Frederic? Do not frighten me,—if you can avoid it!”

“You need not be frightened ma’am, for you did not know him. Mr. Amedroz is dead.”

“No!” said Lady Aylmer, seating herself.

“Dead!” said Belinda, holding up her hands.

“God bless my soul!” said the baronet, who had now followed the ladies into the room. “Dead! Why, Fred, he was five years younger than I am!”

Then Captain Aylmer read the words of the message:—“Mr. Amedroz died this morning at five o’clock. I have sent word to the lawyer and to Mr. Belton.”

“Who does it come from?” asked Lady Aylmer.

“From Colonel Askerton.”

Lady Aylmer paused, and shook her head, and moved her foot uneasily upon the carpet. The tidings, as far as they went, might be unexceptionable, but the source from whence they had come had evidently polluted them in her ladyship’s judgment. Then she uttered a series of inter-ejaculations, expressions of mingled sorrow and anger.

“There was no one else near her,” said Captain Aylmer, apologetically.

“Is there no clergyman in the parish?”

“He lives a long way off. The message had to be sent at once.”

“Are there no servants in the house? It looks,—it looks——. But I am the last person in the world to form a harsh judgment of a young woman at such a moment as this. What did she say in her letter, Fred?”

Captain Aylmer had devoted two hours of consideration to the letter before the telegram had come to relieve his mind by a fresh subject, and in those two hours he had not been able to extract much of comfort out of the document. It was, as he felt, a stubborn, stiff-necked, disobedient, almost rebellious letter. It contained a manifest defiance of his mother, and exhibited doctrines of most questionable morality. It had become to him a matter of doubt whether he could possibly marry a woman who could entertain such ideas and write such a letter. If the doubt was to be decided in his own mind against Clara, he had better show the letter at once to his mother, and allow her ladyship to fight the battle for

him ;—a task which, as he well knew, her ladyship would not be slow to undertake. But he had not succeeded in answering the question satisfactorily to himself when the telegram arrived and diverted all his thoughts. Now that Mr. Amedroz was dead, the whole thing might be different. Clara would come away from Belton and Mrs. Askerton, and begin life, as it were, afresh. It seemed as though in such an emergency she ought to have another chance ; and therefore he did not hasten to pronounce his judgment. Lady Aylmer also felt something of this, and forbore to press her question when it was not answered.

“She will have to leave Belton now, I suppose ?” said Sir Anthony.

“The property will belong to a distant cousin,—a Mr. William Belton.”

“And where will she go ?” said Lady Aylmer. “I suppose she has no place that she can call her home ?”

“Would it not be a good thing to ask her here ?” said Belinda. Such a question as that was very rash on the part of Miss Aylmer.

In the first place, the selection of guests for Aylmer Park was rarely left to her; and in this special case she should have understood that such a proposal should have been fully considered by Lady Aylmer before it reached Frederic's ears.

"I think it would be a very good plan," said Captain Aylmer, generously.

Lady Aylmer shook her head. "I should like much to know what she has said about that unfortunate connection before I offer to take her by the hand myself. I'm sure Fred will feel that I ought to do so."

But Fred retreated from the room without showing the letter. He retreated from the room and betook himself to solitude, that he might again endeavour to make up his mind as to what he would do. He put on his hat and his great-coat and gloves, and went off,—without his luncheon,—that he might consider it all. Clara Amedroz had now no home,—and, indeed, very little means of providing one. If he intended that she should be his wife, he must furnish her with a home at once. It

seemed to him that three houses might possibly be open to her,—of which one, the only one which under such circumstances would be proper, was Aylmer Park. The other two were Plaistow Hall and Mrs. Askerton's cottage at Belton. As to the latter,—should she ever take shelter there, everything must be over between him and her. On that point there could be no doubt. He could not bring himself to marry a wife out of Mrs. Askerton's drawing-room, nor could he expect his mother to receive a young woman brought into the family under such circumstances. And Plaistow Hall was almost as bad. It was as bad to him, though it would, perhaps, be less objectionable in the eyes of Lady Aylmer. Should Clara go to Plaistow Hall there must be an end to everything. Of that also he taught himself to be quite certain. Then he took out Clara's letter and read it again. She acknowledged the story about the woman to be true,—such a story as it was too,—and yet refused to quarrel with the woman;—had absolutely promised the woman

not to quarrel with her! Then he read and re-read the passage in which Clara claimed the right of forming her own opinion in such matters. Nothing could be more indelicate; —nothing more unfit for his wife. He began to think that he had better show the letter to his mother, and acknowledge that the match must be broken off. That softening of his heart which had followed upon the receipt of the telegraphic message departed from him as he dwelt upon the stubborn, stiff-necked, unfeminine obstinacy of the letter. Then he remembered that nothing had as yet been done towards putting his aunt's fifteen hundred pounds absolutely into Clara's hands; and he remembered also that she might at the present moment be in great want. William Belton might not, improbably, assist her in her want, and this idea was wormwood to him in spite of his almost formed resolution to give up his own claims. He calculated that the income arising from fifteen hundred pounds would be very small, and he wished that he had counselled his aunt to double the legacy. He

thought very much about the amount of the money and the way in which it might be best expended, and was, after his cold fashion, really solicitous as to Clara's welfare. If he could have fashioned her future life, and his own too, in accordance with his own now existing wishes, I think he would have arranged that neither of them should marry at all, and that to him should be assigned the duty and care of being Clara's protector,—with full permission to tell her his mind as often as he pleased on the subject of Mrs Askerton. Then he went in and wrote a note to Mr. Green, the lawyer, desiring that the interest of the fifteen hundred pounds for one year might be at once remitted to Miss Amedroz. He knew that he ought to write to her himself immediately, without loss of a post; but how was he to write while things were in their present position? Were he now to condole with her on her father's death, without any reference to the great Askerton iniquity, he would thereby be condoning all that was past, and acknowledging the truth and propriety of

her arguments. And he would be doing even worse than that. He would be cutting the ground absolutely from beneath his own feet as regarded that escape from his engagement which he was contemplating.

What a cold-hearted, ungenerous wretch he must have been! That will be the verdict against him. But the verdict will be untrue. Cold-hearted and ungenerous he was; but he was no wretch,—as men and women are now-a-days called wretches. He was chilly hearted, but yet quite capable of enough love to make him a good son, a good husband, and a good father too. And though he was ungenerous from the nature of his temperament, he was not close-fisted or over covetous. And he was a just man, desirous of obtaining nothing that was not fairly his own. But, in truth, the artists have been so much in the habit of painting for us our friends' faces without any of those flaws and blotches with which work and high living are apt to disfigure us, that we turn in disgust from a portrait in which the roughnesses and pimples are made apparent.]

But it was essential that he should now do something, and before he sat down to dinner he did show Clara's letter to his mother. "Mother," he said, as he sat himself down in her little room up-stairs;—and she knew well by the tone of his voice, and by the mode of his address, that there was to be a solemn occasion, and a serious deliberative council on the present existing family difficulty,—“mother, of course I have intended to let you know what is the nature of Clara's answer to my letter.”

“I am glad there is to be no secret between us, Frederic. You know how I dislike secrets in families.” As she said this she took the letter out of her son's hands with an eagerness that was almost greedy. As she read it, he stood over her, watching her eyes, as they made their way down the first page and on to the second, and across to the third, and so, gradually on, till the whole reading was accomplished. What Clara had written about her cousin Will, Lady Aylmer did not quite understand; and on this point now she was

so little anxious that she passed over that portion of the letter readily. But when she came to Mrs. Askerton and the allusions to herself, she took care to comprehend the meaning and weight of every word. "Divide your words and mine! Why should we want to divide them? Not agree with me about Mrs. Askerton! How is it possible that any decent young woman should not agree with me! It is a matter in which there is no room for a doubt. True;—the story true! Of course it is true. Does she not know that it would not have reached her from Aylmer Park if it were not true? Provocation! Badly treated! Went away! Married to Colonel Askerton as soon as Captain Berdmore died! Why, Frederic, she cannot have been taught to understand the first principle of morals in life! And she that was so much with my poor sister! Well, well!" The reader should understand that the late Mrs. Winterfield and Lady Aylmer had never been able to agree with each other on religious subjects. "Remember that they are married,

Why should we remember anything of the kind? It does not make an atom of difference to the woman's character. Repented! How can Clara say whether she has repented or not? But that has nothing to do with it. Not quarrel with her,—as she calls it! Not give her up! Then, Frederic, of course it must be all over, as far as you are concerned." When she had finished her reading, she returned the letter, still open, to her son, shaking her head almost triumphantly. "As far as I am a judge of a young woman's character, I can only give you one counsel," said Lady Aylmer solemnly.

"I think that she should have another chance," said Captain Aylmer.

"What other chance can you give her? It seems to me that she is obstinately bent on her own destruction."

"You might ask her to come here, as Belinda suggested."

"Belinda was very foolish to suggest anything of the kind without more consideration."

“ I suppose that my future wife would be made welcome here ? ”

“ Yes, Frederic, certainly. I do not know who could be more welcome. But is she to be your wife ? ”

“ We are engaged. ”

“ But does not that letter break any engagement? Is there not enough in that to make such a marriage quite out of the question? What do you think about it yourself, Frederic ? ”

“ I think that she should have another chance. ”

What would Clara have thought of all this herself, if she could have heard the conversation between Lady Aylmer and her betrothed husband, and have known that her lover was proposing to give her “ another chance ? ” But it is lucky for us that we seldom know what our best friends say on our behalf, when they discuss us and our faults behind our backs.

“ What chance, Frederic, can she have? She knows all about this horrid woman, and

yet refuses to give her up! What chance can she have after that?"

"I think that you might have her here,—and talk to her." Lady Aylmer, in answer to this, simply shook her head. And I think she was right in supposing that such shaking of her head was a sufficient reply to her son's proposition. What talking could possibly be of service to such a one as this Miss Amedroz? Why should she throw her pearls before swine? "We must either ask her to come here, or else I must go to her," said Captain Aylmer.

"I don't see that at all, Frederic."

"I think it must be so. As she is situated at present she has got no home; and I think it would be very horrid that she should be driven into that woman's house, simply because she has no other shelter for her head."

"I suppose she can remain where she is for the present?"

"She is all alone, you know; and it must be very gloomy;—and her cousin can turn her out at a moment's notice."

“But all that would not entitle her to come here, unless——”

“No;—I quite understand that. But you cannot wonder that I should feel the hardship of her position.”

“Who is to be blamed if it be hard? You see, Frederic, I take my standing upon that letter;—her own letter. How am I to ask a young woman into my house who declares openly that my opinion on such a matter goes for nothing with her? How am I to do it? That’s what I ask you. How am I to do it? It’s all very well for Belinda to suggest this and that. But how am I to do it? That’s what I want to know.”

But at last Lady Aylmer managed to answer the question for herself, and did do it. But this was not done on that Sunday afternoon, nor on the Monday, nor on the Tuesday. The question was closely debated, and at last the anxious mother perceived that the giving of the invitation would be more safe than withholding it. Captain Aylmer at last expressed his determination to go to

Belton unless the invitation were given; and then, should he do that, there might be danger that he would never be again seen at Aylmer Park till he brought Clara Amedroz with him as his wife. The position was one of great difficulty, but the interests at stake were so immense that something must be risked. It might be that Clara would not come when invited, and in that case her obstinacy would be a great point gained. And if she did come——! Well; Lady Aylmer admitted to herself that the game would be difficult,—difficult and very troublesome; but yet it might be played, and perhaps won. Lady Aylmer was a woman who had great confidence in herself. Not so utterly had victory in such contests deserted her hands, that she need fear to break a lance with Miss Amedroz beneath her own roof, when the occasion was so pressing.

The invitation was therefore sent in a note written by herself, and was inclosed in a letter from her son. After much consultation and many doubts on the subject, it was at last agreed that nothing further should now

be urged about Mrs Askerton. "She shall have her chance," said Lady Aylmer over and over again, repeating her son's words. "She shall have her chance." Lady Aylmer, therefore, in her note, confined herself strictly to the giving of the invitation, and to a suggestion that, as Clara had now no settled home of her own, a temporary sojourn at Aylmer Park might be expedient. And Captain Aylmer in his letter hardly said much more. He knew, as he wrote the words, that they were cold and comfortless, and that he ought on such an occasion to have written words that should have been warm at any rate, even though they might not have contained comfort. But, to have written with affection, he should have written at once, and he had postponed his letter from the Sunday till the Wednesday. It had been absolutely necessary that that important question as to the invitation should be answered before he could write at all.

When all this was settled he went up to London; and there was an understanding between him and his mother that he should

return to Aylmer Park with Clara, in the event of her acceptance of the invitation.

“You won’t go down to Belton for her?” said the mother.

“No;—I do not think that will be necessary,” said the son.

“I should think not,” said the mother.

CHAPTER IX.

WILLIAM BELTON DOES NOT GO OUT HUNTING.

WE will now follow the other message which was sent down into Norfolk, and which did not get into Belton's hands till the Monday morning. He was sitting with his sister at breakfast, and was prepared for hunting, when the paper was brought into the room. Telegraphic messages were not very common at Plaistow Hall, and on the arrival of any that had as yet reached that house, something of that awe had been felt with which such missives were always accompanied in their earliest days. "A telegruff message, mum, for Mr. William," said the maid, looking at

her mistress with eyes opened wide, as she handed the important bit of paper to her master. Will opened it rapidly, laying down the knife and fork with which he was about to operate upon a ham before him. He was dressed in boots and breeches, and a scarlet coat,—in which garb he was, in his sister's eyes, the most handsome man in Norfolk.

“Oh, Mary!” he exclaimed.

“What is it, Will?”

“Mr. Amedroz is dead.”

Miss Belton put out her hand for the paper before she spoke again, as though she could better appreciate the truth of what she heard when reading it herself on the telegraph slip than she had done from her brother's words. “How sudden! how terribly sudden!” she said.

“Sudden indeed. When I left him he was not well, certainly, but I should have said that he might have lived for twenty years. Poor old man! I can hardly say why it was so, but I had taken a liking to him.”

“You take a liking to everybody, Will.”

“No I don’t. I know people I don’t like.” Will Belton as he said this was thinking of Captain Aylmer, and he pressed the heel of his boot hard against the floor.

“And Mr. Amedroz is dead! It seems to be so terribly sudden. What will she do, Will?”

“That’s what I’m thinking about.”

“Of course you are, my dear. I can see that. I wish,—I wish——”

“It’s no good wishing anything, Mary. I don’t think wishing ever did any good yet. If I might have my wish, I shouldn’t know how to have it.”

“I was wishing that you didn’t think so much about it.”

“You need not be troubled about me. I shall do very well. But what is to become of her,—now at once? Might she not come here? You are now the nearest female relation that she has.” Mary looked at him with her anxious, painful eyes, and he knew by her look that she did not approve of his plan. “I could go away,” he continued. “She could

come to you without being troubled by seeing me.”

“And where would you go, Will?”

“What does it matter? To the devil, I suppose.”

“Oh, Will, Will!”

“You know what I mean. I'd go anywhere. Where is she to find a home till,—till she is married?” He had paused at the word; but was determined not to shrink from it, and bolted it out in a loud, sharp tone, so that both he and she recognised all the meaning of the word,—all that was conveyed in the idea. He hated himself when he endeavoured to conceal from his own mind any of the misery that was coming upon him. He loved her. He could not get over it. The passion was on him,—like a palsy, for the shaking off of which no sufficient physical energy was left to him. It clung to him in his goings out and comings in with a painful, wearing tenacity, against which he would now and again struggle, swearing that it should be so no longer,—but against which he always struggled in vain. It was

with him when he was hunting. He was ever thinking of it when the bird rose before his gun. As he watched the furrow, as his men and horses would drive it straight and deep through the ground, he was thinking of her,—and not of the straightness and depth of the furrow, as had been his wont in former years. Then he would turn away his face, and stand alone in his field, blinded by the salt drops in his eyes, weeping at his own weakness. And when he was quite alone, he would stamp his foot on the ground, and throw abroad his arms, and curse himself. What Nessus's shirt was this that had fallen upon him, and unmanned him from the sole of his foot to the top of his head? He went through the occupations of the week. He hunted, and shot, and gave his orders, and paid his men their wages ;—but he did it all with a palsy of love upon him as he did it. He wanted her, and he could not overcome the want. He could not bear to confess to himself that the thing by which he had set so much store could never belong to him. His sister understood it all, and sometimes he was

almost angry with her because of her understanding it. She sympathised with him in all his moods, and sometimes he would shake away her sympathy as though it scalded him. "Where is she to find a home till,—till she is married?" he said.

Not a word had as yet been said between them about the property which was now his estate. He was now Belton of Belton, and it must be supposed that both he and she had remembered that it was so. But hitherto not a word had been said between them on that point. Now she was compelled to allude to it. "Cannot she live at the Castle for the present?"

"What ;—all alone?"

"Of course she is remaining there now."

"Yes," said he, "of course she is there now. Now! Why, remember what these telegraphic messages are. He died only on yesterday morning. Of course she is there, but I do not think it can be good that she should remain there. There is no one near her where she is but that Mrs. Askerton. It can hardly be good

for her to have no other female friend at such a time as this."

"I do not think that Mrs. Askerton will hurt her."

"Mrs. Askerton will not hurt her at all,—and as long as Clara does not know the story, Mrs. Askerton may serve as well as another. But yet——"

"Can I go to her, Will?"

"No, dearest. The journey would kill you in winter. And he would not like it. We are bound to think of that for her sake,—cold-hearted, thankless, meagre-minded creature as I know he is."

"I do not know why he should be so bad."

"No, nor I. But I know that he is. Never mind. Why should we talk about him? I suppose she'll have to go there,—to Aylmer Park. I suppose they will send for her, and keep her there till it's all finished. I'll tell you what, Mary,—I shall give her the place."

"What,—Belton Castle?"

“Why not? Will it ever be of any good to you or me? Do you want to go and live there?”

“No, indeed;—not for myself.”

“And do you think that I could live there? Besides, why should she be turned out of her father’s house?”

“He would not be mean enough to take it.”

“He would be mean enough for anything. Besides, I should take very good care that it should be settled upon her.”

“That’s nonsense, Will;—it is indeed. You are now William Belton of Belton, and you must remain so.”

“Mary,—I would sooner be Will Belton with Clara Amedroz by my side to get through the world with me, and not the interest of an acre either at Belton Castle or at Plaistow Hall! And I believe I should be the richer man at the end,—if there were any good in that.” Then he went out of the room, and she heard him go through the kitchen, and knew that he passed out into the farm-yard, towards the stable, by the back-door. He intended, it

seemed, to go on with his hunting in spite of this death which had occurred. She was sorry for it, but she could not venture to stop him. And she was sorry also that nothing had been settled as to the writing of any letter to Clara. She, however, would take upon herself to write while he was gone.

He went straight out towards the stables, hardly conscious of what he was doing or where he was going, and found his hack ready saddled for him in the stall. Then he remembered that he must either go or come to some decision that he would not go. The horse that he intended to ride had been sent on to the meet, and if he were not to be used, some message must be despatched as to the animal's return. But Will was half inclined to go, although he knew that the world would judge him to be heartless if he were to go hunting immediately on the receipt of the tidings which had reached him that morning. He thought that he would like to set the world at defiance in this matter. Let Frederic Aylmer go into mourning for the old man who was

dead. Let Frederic Aylmer be solicitous for the daughter who was left lonely in the old house. No doubt he, Will Belton, had inherited the dead man's estate, and should, therefore, in accordance with all the ordinary rules of the world on such matters, submit himself at any rate to the decency of funereal reserve. An heir should not be seen out hunting on the day on which such tidings as to his heritage had reached him. But he did not wish, in his present mood, to be recognised as the heir. He did not want the property. He would have preferred to rid himself altogether of any of the obligations which the ownership of the estate entailed upon him. It was not permitted to him to have the custody of the old squire's daughter, and therefore he was unwilling to meddle with any of the old squire's concerns.

Belton had gone into the stable, and had himself loosed the animal, leading him out into the yard as though he were about to mount him. Then he had given the reins to a stable boy, and had walked away among the

farm buildings, not thinking of what he was doing. The lad stood staring at him with open mouth, not at all understanding his master's hesitation. The meet, as the boy knew, was fourteen miles off, and Belton had not allowed himself above an hour and a half for the journey. It was his practice to jump into the saddle and bustle out of the place, as though seconds were important to him. He would look at his watch with accuracy, and measure his pace from spot to spot, as though minutes were too valuable to be lost. But now he wandered away like one distraught, and the stable boy knew that something was wrong. "I thout he was a thinken of the white cow as choked 'erself with the tunnup that was skipped in the chopping," said the boy, as he spoke of his master afterwards to the old groom. At last, however, a thought seemed to strike Belton. "Do you get on Brag," he said to the boy, "and ride off to Goldingham Corner, and tell Daniel to bring the horse home again. I shan't hunt to-day. And I think I shall go away from home. If

so, tell him to be sure the horses are out every morning;—and tell him to stop their beans. I mightn't hunt again for the next month." Then he returned into the house, and went to the parlour in which his sister was sitting. "I shan't go out to-day," he said.

"I thought you would not, Will," she answered.

"Not that I see any harm in it."

"I don't say that there is any harm, but it is as well on such occasions to do as others do."

"That's humbug, Mary."

"No, Will; I do not think that. When any practice has become the fixed rule of the society in which we live, it is always wise to adhere to that rule, unless it call upon us to do something that is actually wrong. One should not offend the prejudices of the world, even if one is quite sure that they are prejudices."

"It hasn't been that that has brought me back, Mary. I'll tell you what. I think I'll go down to Belton—after all."

His sister did not know what to say in

answer to this. Her chief anxiety was, of course, on behalf of her brother. That he should be made to forget Clara Amedroz, if that were only possible, was her great desire; and his journey at such a time as this down to Belton was not the way to accomplish such forgetting. And then she felt that Clara might very possibly not wish to see him. Had Will simply been her cousin, such a visit might be very well; but he had attempted to be more than her cousin, and therefore it would probably not be well. Captain Aylmer might not like it; and Mary felt herself bound to consider even Captain Aylmer's likings in such a matter. And yet she could not bear to oppose him in anything. "It would be a very long journey," she said.

"What does that signify?"

"And then it might so probably be for nothing."

"Why should it be for nothing?"

"Because——"

"Because what? Why don't you speak out? You need not be afraid of hurting me.

Nothing that you can say can make it at all worse than it is."

"Dear Will, I wish I could make it better."

"But you can't. Nobody can make it either better or worse. I promised her once before that I would go to her when she might be in trouble, and I will be as good as my word. I said I would be a brother to her;—and so I will. So help me God, I will!" Then he rushed out of the room, striding through the door as though he would knock it down, and hurried up-stairs to his own chamber. When there he stripped himself of his hunting things, and dressed himself again with all the expedition in his power; and then he threw a heap of clothes into a large portmanteau, and set himself to work packing as though everything in the world were to depend upon his catching a certain train. And he went to a locked drawer, and taking out a cheque-book, folded it up and put it into his pocket. Then he rang the bell violently; and as he was locking the portmanteau, pressing down the lid with all his weight and all

his strength, he ordered that a certain mare should be put into a certain dog-cart, and that somebody might be ready to drive over with him to the Downham Station. Within twenty minutes of the time of his rushing up-stairs he appeared again before his sister with a great-coat on, and a railway rug hanging over his arm. "Do you mean that you are going to-day?" said she.

"Yes. I'll catch the 11.40 up-train at Downham. What's the good of going unless I go at once? If I can be of any use it will be at the first. It may be that she will have nobody there to do anything for her."

"There is the clergyman, and Colonel Askerton,—even if Captain Aylmer has not gone down."

"The clergyman and Colonel Askerton are nothing to her. And if that man is there I can come back again."

"You will not quarrel with him?"

"Why should I quarrel with him? What is there to quarrel about? I'm not such a fool as to quarrel with a man because I hate him.

If he is there I shall see her for a minute or two, and then I shall come back."

"I know it is no good my trying to dissuade you."

"None on earth. If you knew it all you would not try to dissuade me. Before I thought of asking her to be my wife,—and yet I thought of that very soon;—but before I ever thought of that, I told her that when she wanted a brother's help I would give it her. Of course I was thinking of the property,—that she shouldn't be turned out of her father's house like a beggar. I hadn't any settled plan then;—how could I? But I meant her to understand that when her father died I would be the same to her that I am to you. If you were alone, in distress, would I not go to you?"

"But I have no one else, Will," said she, stretching out her hand to him where he stood.

"That makes no difference," he replied, almost roughly. "A promise is a promise, and I resolved from the first that my promise should hold good in spite of my disappoint-

ment. Dear, dear ;—it seems but the other day when I made it,—and now, already, everything is changed.” As he was speaking the servant entered the room, and told him that the horse and gig were ready for him. “I shall just do it nicely,” said he, looking at his watch. “I have over an hour. God bless you, Mary. I shan’t be away long. You may be sure of that.”

“I don’t suppose you can tell as yet, Will.”

“What should keep me long? I shall see Green as I go by, and that is half of my errand. I dare say I shan’t stay above a night down in Somersetshire.”

“You’ll have to give some orders about the estate.”

“I shall not say a word on the subject,—to anybody; that is, not to anybody there. I am going to look after her, and not the estate.” Then he stooped down and kissed his sister, and in another minute was turning the corner out of the farm-yard on to the road at a quick pace, not losing a foot of ground in the turn, in that fashion of rapidity which the

horses at Plaistow Hall soon learned from their master. The horse is a closely sympathetic beast, and will make his turns, and do his trotings, and comport himself generally in strict unison with the pulsations of his master's heart. When a horse won't jump it is generally the case that the inner man is declining to jump also, let the outer man seem ever so anxious to accomplish the feat.

Belton, who was generally very communicative with his servants, always talking to any man he might have beside him in his dog-cart about the fields and cattle and tillage around him, said not a word to the boy who accompanied him on this occasion. He had a good many things to settle in his mind before he got to London, and he began upon the work as soon as he had turned the corner out of the farm-yard. As regarded this Belton estate, which was now altogether his own, he had always had doubts and qualms,—qualms of feeling rather than of conscience; and he had, also, always entertained a strong family ambition. His people, ever so far back, had

been Beltons of Belton. They told him that his family could be traced back to very early days,—before the Plantagenets, as he believed, though on this point of the subject he was very hazy in his information,—and he liked the idea of being the man by whom the family should be reconstructed in its glory. Worldly circumstances had been so kind to him, that he could take up the Belton estate with more of the prestige of wealth than had belonged to any of the owners of the place for many years past. Should it come to pass that living there would be desirable, he could rebuild the old house, and make new gardens, and fit himself out with all the pleasant braveries of a well-to-do English squire. There need be no pinching and scraping, no question whether a carriage would be possible, no doubt as to the prudence of preserving game. All this had given much that was delightful to his prospects. And he had, too, been instigated by a somewhat weak desire to emerge from that farmer's rank into which he knew that many connected with him had supposed him to have

sunk. It was true that he farmed land that was half his own,—and that, even at Plaistow, he was a wealthy man; but Plaistow Hall, with all its comforts, was a farm-house; and the ambition to be more than a farmer had been strong upon him.

But then there had been the feeling that in taking the Belton estate he would be robbing his cousin Clara of all that should have been hers. It must be remembered that he had not been brought up in the belief that he would ever become the owner of Belton. All his high ambition in that matter had originated with the wretched death of Clara's brother. Could he bring himself to take it all with pleasure, seeing that it came to him by so sad a chance,—by a catastrophe so deplorable? When he would think of this, his mind would revolt from its own desires, and he would declare to himself that his inheritance would come to him with a stain of blood upon it. He, indeed, would have been guiltless; but how could he take his pleasure in the shades of Belton without thinking of the tragedy which

had given him the property? Such had been the thoughts and desires, mixed in their nature and militating against each other, which had induced him to offer his first visit to his cousin's house. We know what was the effect of that visit, and by what pleasant scheme he had endeavoured to overcome all his difficulties, and so to become master of Belton that Clara Amedroz should also be its mistress. There had been a way which, after two days' intimacy with Clara, seemed to promise him comfort and happiness on all sides. But he had come too late, and that way was closed against him! Now the estate was his, and what was he to do with it? Clara belonged to his rival, and in what way would it become him to treat her? He was still thinking simply of the cruelty of the circumstances which had thrown Captain Aylmer between him and his cousin, when he drove himself up to the railway station at Downham.

“Take her back steady, Jem,” he said to the boy.

“ I’ll be sure to take her wery steady,” Jem answered.

“ And tell Compton to have the samples of barley ready for me. I may be back any day, and we shall be sowing early this spring.

Then he left his cart, followed the porter who had taken his luggage eagerly, knowing that Mr. Belton was always good for sixpence, and in five minutes’ time he was again in motion.

On his arrival in London he drove at once to the chambers of his friend, Mr. Green, and luckily found the lawyer there. Had he missed doing this, it was his intention to go out to his friend’s house ; and in that case he could not have gone down to Taunton till the next morning ; but now he would be able to say what he wished to say, and hear what he wished to hear, and would travel down by the night-mail train. He was anxious that Clara should feel that he had hurried to her without a moment’s delay. It would do no good. He knew that. Nothing that he could do

would alter her, or be of any service to him. She had accepted this man, and had herself no power of making a change, even if she should wish it. But still there was to him something of gratification in the idea that she should be made to feel that he, Belton, was more instant in his affection, more urgent in his good offices, more anxious to befriend her in her difficulties, than the man whom she had consented to take for her husband. Aylmer would probably go down to Belton, but Will was very anxious to be the first on the ground,—very anxious,—though his doing so could be of no use. All this was wrong on his part. He knew that it was wrong, and he abused himself for his own selfishness. But such self-abuse gave him no aid in escaping from his own wickedness. He would, if possible, be at Belton before Captain Aylmer; and he would, if possible, make Clara feel that, though he was not a member of Parliament, though he was not much given to books, though he was only a farmer, yet he had at any rate as much heart and spirit as the fine gentleman whom she preferred to him.

“I thought I should see you,” said the lawyer; “but I hardly expected you so soon as this.”

“I ought to have been a day sooner, only we don't get our telegraphic messages on a Sunday.” He still kept his great-coat on; and it seemed by his manner that he had no intention of staying where he was above a minute or two.

“You'll come out and dine with me to-day?” said Mr. Green.

“I can't do that, for I shall go down by the mail train.”

“I never saw such a fellow in my life. What good will that do? It is quite right that you should be there in time for the funeral; but I don't suppose he will be buried before this day week.”

But Belton had never thought about the funeral. When he had spoken to his sister of saying but a few words to Clara and then returning, he had forgotten that there would be any such ceremony, or that he would be delayed by any such necessity.

“I was not thinking about the funeral,” said Belton.

“You’ll only find yourself uncomfortable there.”

“Of course I shall be uncomfortable.”

“You can’t do anything about the property, you know.”

“What do you mean by doing anything?” said Belton, in an angry tone.

“You can’t very well take possession of the place, at any rate, till after the funeral. It would not be considered the proper thing to do.”

“You think, then, that I’m a bird of prey, smelling the feast from afar off, and hurrying at the dead man’s carcass as soon as the breath is out of his body?”

“I don’t think anything of the kind, my dear fellow.”

“Yes, you do, or you wouldn’t talk to me about doing the proper thing! I don’t care a straw about the proper thing! If I find that there’s anything to be done to-morrow that can be of any use, I shall do it, though all Somer-

setshire should think it improper! But I'm not going to look after my own interests!"

"Take off your coat and sit down, Will, and don't look so angry at me. I know that you're not greedy, well enough. Tell me what you are going to do, and let me see if I can help you."

Belton did as he was told; he pulled off his coat and sat himself down by the fire. "I don't know that you can do anything to help me,—at least, not as yet. But I must go and see after her. Perhaps she may be all alone."

"I suppose she is all alone."

"He hasn't gone down, then?"

"Who;—Captain Aylmer? No;—he hasn't gone down, certainly. He is in Yorkshire."

"I'm glad of that!"

"He won't hurry himself. He never does, I fancy. I had a letter from him this morning about Miss Amedroz."

"And what did he say?"

"He desired me to send her seventy-five pounds,—the interest of her aunt's money."

"Seventy-five pounds!" said Will Belton, contemptuously.

“He thought she might want money at once; and I sent her the cheque to-day. It will go down by the same train that carries you.”

“Seventy-five pounds! And you are sure that he has not gone himself?”

“It isn’t likely that he should have written to me, and passed through London himself, at the same time;—but it is possible, no doubt. I don’t think he even knew the old squire; and there is no reason why he should go to the funeral.”

“No reason at all,” said Belton,—who felt that Captain Aylmer’s presence at the Castle would be an insult to himself. “I don’t know what on earth he should do there,—except that I think him just the fellow to intrude where he is not wanted.” And yet Will was in his heart despising Captain Aylmer because he had not already hurried down to the assistance of the girl whom he professed to love.

“He is engaged to her, you know,” said the lawyer, in a low voice.

“What difference does that make with such a fellow as he is,—a cold-blooded fish of a man,

who thinks of nothing in the world but being respectable? Engaged to her! Oh, damn him!"

"I've not the slightest objection. I don't think, however, that you'll find him at Belton before you. No doubt she will have heard from him; and it strikes me as very possible that she may go to Aylmer Park."

"What should she go there for?"

"Would it not be the best place for her?"

"No. My house would be the best place for her. I am her nearest relative. Why should she not come to us?"

Mr. Green turned round his chair and poked the fire, and fidgeted about for some moments before he answered. "My dear fellow, you must know that that wouldn't do." He then said, "You ought to feel that it wouldn't do;—you ought indeed."

"Why shouldn't my sister receive Miss Amedroz as well as that old woman down in Yorkshire?"

"If I may tell you, I will."

“Of course you may tell me.”

“Because Miss Amedroz is engaged to be married to that old woman’s son, and is not engaged to be married to your sister’s brother. The thing is done, and what is the good of interfering. As far as she is concerned, a great burden is off your hands.”

“What do you mean by a burden?”

“I mean that her engagement to Captain Aylmer makes it unnecessary for you to suppose that she is in want of any pecuniary assistance. You told me once before that you would feel yourself called upon to see that she wanted nothing.”

“So I do now.”

“But Captain Aylmer will look after that.”

“I tell you what it is, Joe; I mean to settle the Belton property in such a way that she shall have it, and that he shan’t be able to touch it. And it shall go to some one who shall have my name,—William Belton. That’s what I want you to arrange for me.”

“After you are are dead, you mean.”

“I mean now, at once. I won’t take the

estate from her. I hate the place and everything belonging to it. I don't mean her. There is no reason for hating her."

"My dear Will, you are talking nonsense."

"Why is it nonsense? I may give what belongs to me to whom I please."

"You can do nothing of the kind;—at any rate, not by my assistance. You talk as though the world were all over with you,—as though you were never to be married or have any children of your own."

"I shall never marry."

"Nonsense, Will. Don't make such an ass of yourself as to suppose that you'll not get over such a thing as this. You'll be married and have a dozen children yet to provide for. Let the eldest have Belton Castle, and everything will go on then in the proper way."

Belton had now got the poker into his hands, and sat silent for some time, knocking the coals about. Then he got up, and took his hat, and put on his coat. "Of course I can't make you understand me," he said; "at any rate not all at once. I'm not such a fool

as to want to give up my property just because a girl is going to be married to a man I don't like. I'm not such an ass as to give him my estate for such a reason as that ;—for it will be giving it to him, let me tie it up as I may. But I've a feeling about it which makes it impossible for me to take it. How would you like to get a thing by another fellow having destroyed himself?"

"You can't help that. It's yours by law."

"Of course it is. I know that. And as it's mine I can do what I like with it. Well ;—good-bye. When I've got anything to say, I'll write." Then he went down to his cab and had himself driven to the Great Western Railway Hotel.

Captain Aylmer had sent to his betrothed seventy-five pounds ; the exact interest at five per cent. for one year of the sum which his aunt had left her. This was the first subject of which Belton thought when he found himself again in the railway carriage, and he continued thinking of it half the way down to Taunton. Seventy-five pounds ! As

though this favoured lover were prepared to give her exactly her due, and nothing more than her due! Had he been so placed, he, Will Belton, what would he have done? Seventy-five pounds might have been more money than she would have wanted, for he would have taken her to his own house,—to his own bosom, as soon as she would have permitted, and would have so laboured on her behalf, taking from her shoulders all money troubles, that there would have been no question as to principal or interest between them. At any rate he would not have confined himself to sending to her the exact sum which was her due. But then Aylmer was a cold-blooded man,—more like a fish than a man. Belton told himself over and over again that he had discovered that at the single glance which he had had when he saw Captain Aylmer in Green's chambers. Seventy-five pounds indeed! He himself was prepared to give his whole estate to her, if she would take it,—even though she would not marry him, even though she was going to throw

herself away upon that fish! Then he felt somewhat as Hamlet did when he jumped upon Laertes at the grave of Ophelia. Send her seventy-five pounds indeed, while he was ready to drink up Esil for her, or to make over to her the whole Belton estate, and thus abandon the idea for ever of being Belton of Belton!

He reached Taunton in the middle of the night,—during the small hours of the morning in a winter night; but yet he could not bring himself to go to bed. So he knocked up an ostler at the nearest inn, and ordered out a gig. He would go down to the village of Redicote, on the Minehead road, and put up at the public-house there. He could not now have himself driven at once to Belton Castle, as he would have done had the old squire been alive. He fancied that his presence would be a nuisance if he did so. So he went to the little inn at Redicote, reaching that place between four and five o'clock in the morning; and very uncomfortable he was when he got there. But in his present frame of mind he

preferred discomfort. He liked being tired and cold, and felt, when he was put into a chill room, without fire, and with a sanded floor, that things with him were as they ought to be.

Yes,—he could have a fly over to Belton Castle after breakfast. Having learned so much, and ordered a dish of eggs and bacon for his morning's breakfast, he went up-stairs to a miserable little bedroom, to dress himself after his night's journey.

CHAPTER X.

MRS ASKERTON'S GENEROSITY.

THE death of the old man at Belton Castle had been very sudden. At three o'clock in the morning Clara had been called into his room, and at five o'clock she was alone in the world,—having neither father, mother, nor brother; without a home, without a shilling that she could call her own;—with no hope as to her future life, if,—as she had so much reason to suppose,—Captain Aylmer should have chosen to accept her last letter as a ground for permanent separation. But at this moment, on this saddest morning, she did not care much for that chance. It seemed

to be almost indifferent to her, that question of Lady Aylmer and her anger. The more that she was absolutely in need of external friendship, the more disposed was she to reject it, and to declare to herself that she was prepared to stand alone in the world.

For the last week she had understood from the doctor that her father was in truth sinking, and that she might hardly hope ever to see him again convalescent. She had therefore in some sort prepared herself for her loneliness, and anticipated the misery of her position. As soon as it was known to the women in the room that life had left the old man, one of them had taken her by the hand and led her back to her own chamber. "Now, Miss Clara, you had better lie down on the bed again;—you had indeed; you can do nothing sitting up." She took the old woman's advice, and allowed them to do with her as they would. It was true that there was no longer any work by which she could make herself useful in that house,—in that house, or, as far as she could see, in any other. Yes; she

would go to bed, and lying there would feel how convenient it would be for many persons if she also could be taken away to her long rest, as her father, and aunt, and brother had been taken before her. Her name and family had been unfortunate, and it would be well that there should be no Amedroz left to trouble those more fortunate persons who were to come after them. In her sorrow and bitterness she included both her cousin Will and Captain Aylmer among those more fortunate ones for whose sake it might be well that she should be made to vanish from off the earth. She had read Captain Aylmer's letter over and over again since she had answered it, and had read nearly as often the copy of her own reply,—and had told herself, as she read them, that of course he would not forgive her. He might perhaps pardon her, if she would submit to him in everything; but that she would not submit to his commands respecting Mrs. Askerton she was fully resolved,—and, therefore, there could be no hope. Then, when she remembered how lately her dear father's

spirit had fled, she hated herself for having allowed her mind to dwell on anything beyond her loss of him.

She was still in her bedroom, having fallen into that half-waking slumber which the numbness of sorrow so often produces, when word was brought to her that Mrs. Askerton was in the house. It was the first time that Mrs. Askerton had ever crossed the door, and the remembrance that it was so came upon her at once. During her father's lifetime it had seemed to be understood that their neighbour should have no admittance there;—but now,—now that her father was gone,—the barrier was to be overthrown. And why not? Why should not Mrs. Askerton come to her? Why, if Mrs. Askerton chose to be kind to her, should she not altogether throw herself into her friend's arms? Of course her doing so would give mortal offence to everybody at Aylmer Park; but why need she stop to think of that? She had already made up her mind that she would not obey orders from Aylmer Park on this subject.

She had not seen Mrs. Askerton since that interview between them which was described some few chapters back. Then everything had been told between them, so that there was no longer any mystery either on the one side or on the other. Then Clara had assured her friend of her loving friendship in spite of any edicts to the contrary which might come from Aylmer Park; and after that what could be more natural than that Mrs. Askerton should come to her in her sorrow. "She says she'll come up to you if you'll let her," said the servant. But Clara declined this proposition, and in a few minutes went down to the small parlour in which she had lately lived, and where she found her visitor.

"My poor dear, this has been very sudden," said Mrs. Askerton.

"Very sudden;—very sudden. And yet, now that he has gone, I know that I expected it."

"Of course I came to you as soon as I heard of it, because I knew you were all alone. If

there had been any one else I should not have come."

"It is very good of you."

"Colonel Askerton thought that perhaps he had better come. I told him of all that which we said to each other the other day. He thought at first that it would be better that I should not see you."

"It was very good of you to come," said Clara again, and as she spoke she put out her hand and took Mrs. Askerton's,—continuing to hold it for awhile; "very good indeed."

"I told him that I could not but go down to you,—that I thought you would not understand it if I stayed away."

"At any rate it was good of you to come to me."

"I don't believe," said Mrs. Askerton, "that what people call consolation is ever of any use. It is a terrible thing to lose a father."

"Very terrible. Ah, dear, I have hardly yet found out how sad it is. As yet I have only been thinking of myself, and wishing that I could be with him."

“Nay, Clara.”

“How can I help it? What am I to do? or where am I to go? Of what use is life to such a one as me? And for him,—who would dare to wish him back again? When people have fallen and gone down in the world it is bad for them to go on living. Everything is a trouble, and there is nothing but vexation.”

“Think what I have suffered, dear.”

“But you have had somebody to care for you, —somebody whom you could trust.”

“And have not you?”

“No; no one.”

“What do you mean, Clara?”

“I mean what I say. I have no one. It is no use asking questions,—not now, at such a time as this. And I did not mean to complain. Complaining is weak and foolish. I have often told myself that I could bear anything, and so I will. When I can bring myself to think of what I have lost in my father I shall be better, even though I shall be more sorrowful. As it is, I hate myself for being so selfish.”

“You will let me come and stay with you to-day, will you not?”

“No, dear; not to-day.”

“Why not to-day, Clara?”

“I shall be better alone. I have so many things to think of.”

“I know well that it would be better that you should not be alone,—much better. But I will not press it. I cannot insist with you as another woman would.”

“You are wrong there; quite wrong. I would be led by you sooner than by any woman living. What other woman is there to whom I would listen for a moment?” As she said this, even in the depth of her sorrow she thought of Lady Aylmer, and strengthened herself in her resolution to rebel against her lover's mother. Then she continued, “I wish I knew my cousin Mary,—Mary Belton; but I have never seen her.”

“Is she nice?”

“So Will tells me; and I know that what he says must be true,—even about his sister.”

“Will, Will! You are always thinking of

your cousin Will. If he be really so good he will show it now."

"How can he show it? What can he do?"

"Does he not inherit all the property?"

"Of course he does. And what of that? When I say that I have no friend I am not thinking of my poverty."

"If he has that regard for you which he pretends, he can do much to assist you. Why should he not come here at once?"

"God forbid."

"Why? Why do you say so? He is your nearest relative."

"If you do not understand I cannot explain."

"Has he been told what has happened?" Mrs. Askerton asked.

"Colonel Askerton sent a message to him, I believe."

"And to Captain Aylmer also?"

"Yes; and to Captain Aylmer. It was Colonel Askerton who sent it."

"Then he will come, of course."

“I think not. Why should he come? He did not even know poor papa.”

“But, my dear Clara, has he not known you?”

“You will see that he will not come. And I tell you beforehand that he will be right to stay away. Indeed, I do not know how he could come;—and I do not want him here.”

“I cannot understand you, Clara.”

“I suppose not. I cannot very well understand myself.”

“I should not be at all surprised if Lady Aylmer were to come herself.”

“Oh, heavens! How little you can know of Lady Aylmer's position and character!”

“But if she is to be your mother-in-law?”

“And even if she were! The idea of Lady Aylmer coming away from Aylmer Park,—all the way from Yorkshire, to such a house as this! If they told me that the Queen was coming it would hardly disconcert me more. But, dear, there is no danger of that at least.”

“I do not know what may have passed between you and him ; but unless there has been some quarrel he will come. That is, he will do so if he is at all like any men whom I have known.”

“He will not come.”

Then Mrs. Askerton made some half-whispered offers of services to be rendered by Colonel Askerton, and soon afterwards took her leave, having first asked permission to come again in the afternoon, and when that was declined, having promised to return on the following morning. As she walked back to the cottage she could not but think more of Clara's engagement to Captain Aylmer than she did of the squire's death. As regarded herself, of course she could not grieve for Mr. Amedroz ; and as regarded Clara, Clara's father had for some time past been apparently so insignificant, even in his own house, that it was difficult to acknowledge the fact that the death of such a one as he might leave a great blank in the world. But what had Clara meant by declaring so emphatically that Captain Aylmer would

not visit Belton, and by speaking of herself as one who had neither position nor friends in the world? If there had been a quarrel, indeed, then it was sufficiently intelligible;—and if there was any such quarrel, from what source must it have arisen? Mrs. Askerton felt the blood rise to her cheeks as she thought of this, and told herself that there could be but one such source. Mrs. Askerton knew that Clara had received orders from Aylmer Castle to discontinue all acquaintance with herself, and, therefore, there could be no doubt as to the cause of the quarrel. It had come to this then, that Clara was to lose her husband because she was true to her friend; or rather because she would not consent to cast an additional stone at one who for some years past had become a mark for many stones.

I am not prepared to say that Mrs. Askerton was a high-minded woman. Misfortunes had come upon her in life of a sort which are too apt to quench high nobility of mind in woman. There are calamities which, by their natural tendencies, elevate the character of women and

add strength to the growth of feminine virtues;—but then, again, there are other calamities which few women can bear without some degradation, without some injury to that delicacy and tenderness which is essentially necessary to make a woman charming,—as a woman. In this, I think, the world is harder to women than to men; that a woman often loses much by the chance of adverse circumstances which a man only loses by his own misconduct. That there are women whom no calamity can degrade is true enough;—and so it is true that there are some men who are heroes; but such are exceptions both among men and women. Not such a one had Mrs. Askerton been. Calamity had come upon her;—partly, indeed, by her own fault, though that might have been pardoned;—but the weight of her misfortunes had been too great for her strength, and she had become in some degree hardened by what she had endured; if not unfeminine, still she was feminine in an inferior degree, with womanly feelings of a lower order. And she had learned to intrigue,

not being desirous of gaining aught by dishonest intriguing, but believing that she could only hold her own by carrying on her battle after that fashion. In all this I am speaking of the general character of the woman, and am not alluding to the one sin which she had committed. Thus, when she had first become acquainted with Miss Amedroz, her conscience had not rebuked her in that she was deceiving her new friend. When asked casually in conversation as to her maiden name, she had not blushed as she answered the question with a falsehood. When, unfortunately, the name of her first husband had in some way made itself known to Clara she had been ready again with some prepared fib. And when she had recognised William Belton, she had thought that the danger to herself of having any one near her who might know her, quite justified her in endeavouring to create ill-will between Clara and her cousin. "Self-preservation is the first law of nature," she would have said; and would have failed to remember, as she did always fail to remember,—that nature does not require by

any of its laws that self-preservation should be aided by falsehood.

But though she was not high-minded, so also was she not ungenerous; and now, as she began to understand that Clara was sacrificing herself because of that promise which had been given when they two had stood together at the window in the cottage drawing-room, she was capable of feeling more for her friend than for herself. She was capable even of telling herself that it was cruel on her part even to wish for any continuance of Clara's acquaintance. "I have made my bed, and I must lie upon it," she said to herself; and then she resolved that, instead of going up to the house on the following day, she would write to Clara, and put an end to the intimacy which existed between them. "The world is hard, and harsh, and unjust," she said, still speaking to herself. "But that is not her fault; I will not injure her because I have been injured myself."

Colonel Askerton was up at the house on the same day, but he did not ask for Miss Amedroz, nor did she see him. Nobody else

came to the house then, or on the following morning, or on that afternoon, though Clara did not fail to tell herself that Captain Aylmer might have been there if he had chosen to take the journey and to leave home as soon as he had received the message; and she made the same calculation as to her cousin Will,—though in that calculation, as we know, she was wrong. These two days had been very desolate with her, and she had begun to look forward to Mrs. Askerton's coming,—when instead of that there came a messenger with a letter from the cottage.

“You can do as you like, my dear,” Colonel Askerton had said on the previous evening to his wife. He had listened to all she had been saying without taking his eyes from off his newspaper, though she had spoken with much eagerness.

“But that is not enough. You should say more to me than that.”

“Now I think you are unreasonable. For myself, I do not care how this matter goes; nor do I care one straw what any tongues may

say. They cannot reach me, excepting so far as they may reach me through you."

"But you should advise me."

"I always do,—copiously, when I think that I know better than you; but in this matter I feel so sure that you know better than I, that I don't wish to suggest anything." Then he went on with his newspaper, and she sat for a while looking at him, as though she expected that something more would be said. But nothing more was said, and she was left entirely to her own guidance,

Since the days in which her troubles had come upon Mrs. Askerton, Clara Amedroz was the first female friend who had come near her to comfort her, and she was very loth to abandon such comfort. There had, too, been something more than comfort, something almost approaching to triumph, when she found that Clara had clung to her with affection after hearing the whole story of her life. Though her conscience had not pricked her while she was exercising all her little planned deceits, she had not taken much pleasure in

them. How should any one take pleasure in such work? Many of us daily deceive our friends, and are so far gone in deceit that the deceit alone is hardly painful to us. But the need of deceiving a friend is always painful. The treachery is easy; but to be treacherous to those we love is never easy,—never easy, even though it be so common. There had been a double delight to this poor woman in the near neighbourhood of Clara Amedroz since there had ceased to be any necessity for falsehood on her part. But now, almost before her joy had commenced, almost before she had realised the sweetness of her triumph, had come upon her this task of doing that herself which Clara in her generosity had refused to do. “I have made my bed and I must lie upon it,” she said. And then, instead of going down to the house as she had promised, she wrote the following letter to Miss Amedroz:—

“The Cottage, Monday.

“DEAREST CLARA,—I need not tell you that I write as I do now with a bleeding

heart. A few days since I should have laughed at any woman who used such a phrase of herself, and declared her to be an affected fool; but now I know how true such a word may be. My heart is bleeding, and I feel myself to be overcome by my disgrace. You told me that I did not understand you yesterday. Of course I understood you. Of course I know how it all is, and why you spoke as you did of Captain Aylmer. He has chosen to think that you could not know me without pollution, and has determined that you must give up either me or him. Though he has judged me I am not going to judge him. The world is on his side; and, perhaps, he is right. He knows nothing of my trials and difficulties,—and why should he? I do not blame him for demanding that his future wife shall not be intimate with a woman who is supposed to have lost her fitness for the society of women.

“At any rate, dearest, you must obey him,—and we will see each other no more. I am quite sure that I should be very wicked were

I to allow you to injure your position in life on my account. You at any rate love him, and would be happy with him, and as you are engaged to him, you have no just ground for resenting his interference.

“ You will understand me now as well as though I were to fill sheets and sheets of paper with what I could say on the subject. The simple fact is, that you and I must forget each other, or simply remember one another as past friends. You will know in a day or two what your plans are. If you remain here, we will go away. If you go away, we will remain here ;—that is, if your cousin will keep us as tenants. I do not of course know what you may have written to Captain Aylmer since our interview up here, but I beg that you will write to him now, and make him understand that he need have no fears in respect of me. You may send him this letter if you will. Oh, dear! if you could know what I suffer as I write this.

“ I feel that I owe you an apology for harassing you on such a subject at such a

time; but I know that I ought not to lose a day in telling you that you are to see nothing more of the friend who has loved you.

“ MARY ASKERTON.”

Clara's first impulse on receiving this letter was to go off at once to the cottage, and insist on her privilege of choosing her own friends. If she preferred Mrs. Askerton to Captain Aylmer, that was no one's business but her own. And she would have done so had she not been afraid of meeting with Colonel Askerton. To him she would not have known how to speak on such a subject;—nor would she have known how to conduct herself at the cottage without speaking of it. And then, after a while, she felt that were she to do so,—should she now deliberately determine to throw herself into Mrs. Askerton's arms,—she must at the same time give up all idea of becoming Captain Aylmer's wife. As she thought of this she asked herself various questions concerning him, which she did not find it easy to answer. Did she wish to be his

wife? Could she assure herself that if they were married they would make each other happy? Did she love him? She was still able to declare to herself that the answer to the last question should be an affirmative; but, nevertheless, she thought that she could give him up without great unhappiness. And when she began to think of Lady Aylmer, and to remember that Frederic Aylmer's imperative demands upon her obedience had, in all probability, been dictated by his mother, she was again anxious to go at once to the cottage, and declare that she would not submit to any interference with her own judgment.

On the next morning the postman brought to her a letter which was of much moment to her,—but he brought to her also tidings which moved her more even than the letter. The letter was from the lawyer, and enclosed a cheque for seventy-five pounds, which he had been instructed to pay to her, as the interest of the money left to her by her aunt. What should be her answer to that letter she knew very well,—and she instantly wrote it, sending

back the cheque to Mr. Green. The postman's news, more important than the letter, told her that William Belton was at the inn at Redicote.

CHAPTER X.

PASSIONATE PLEADING.

CLARA wrote her letter to the lawyer, returning the cheque, before she would allow herself a moment to dwell upon the news of her cousin's arrival. She felt that it was necessary to do that before she should even see her cousin,—thus providing against any difficulty which might arise from adverse advice on his part; and as soon as the letter was written she sent it to the post-office in the village. She would do almost anything that Will might tell her to do, but Captain Aylmer's money she would not take, even though Will might so direct her. They would tell her, no doubt, among them,

that the money was her own,—that she might take it without owing any thanks for it to Captain Aylmer. But she knew better than that,—as she told herself over and over again. Her aunt had left her nothing, and nothing would she have from Captain Aylmer,—unless she had all that Captain Aylmer had to give, after the fashion in which women best love to take such gifts.

Then, when she had done that, she was able to think of her cousin's visit. "I knew he would come," she said to herself, as she sat herself in one of the old chairs in the hall, with a large shawl wrapped round her shoulders. She had just been to the front door, with the nominal purpose of despatching her messenger thence to the post-office; but she had stood for a minute or two under the portico, looking in the direction by which Belton would come from Redicote, expecting, or rather hoping, that she might see his figure or hear the sound of his gig. But she saw nothing and heard nothing, and so returned into the hall, slowly shutting the door. "I knew that he would come," she

said, repeating to herself the same words, over and over again. Yet when Mrs. Askerton had told her that he would do this thing which he had now done, she had expressed herself as almost frightened by the idea. "God forbid," she had said. Nevertheless now that he was there, at Redicote, she assured herself that his coming was a thing of which she had been certain; and she took a joy in the knowledge of his nearness to her which she did not attempt to define to herself. Had he not said that he would be a brother to her, and was it not a brother's part to go to a sister in affliction? "I knew that he would come. I was sure of it. He is so true." As to Captain Aylmer's not coming she said nothing, even to herself; but she felt that she had been equally sure on that subject. Of course, Captain Aylmer would not come! He had sent her seventy-five pounds in lieu of coming, and in doing so was true to his character. Both men were doing exactly that which was to have been expected of them. So at least Clara Amedroz now assured herself. She did not ask herself

how it was that she had come to love the thinner and the meaner of the two men, but she knew well that such had been her fate.

On a sudden she rose from her chair, as though remembering a duty to be performed, and went to the kitchen and directed that breakfast might be got ready for Mr. Belton. He would have travelled all night,—and would be in want of food. Since the old squire's death there had been no regular meal served in the house, and Clara had taken such scraps of food and cups of tea as the old servant of the house had brought to her. But now the cloth must be spread again, and as she did this with her own hands she remembered the dinners which had been prepared for Captain Aylmer at Perivale after his aunt's death. It seemed to her that she was used to be in the house with death, and that the sadness and solemn ceremonies of woe were becoming things familiar to her. There grew upon her a feeling that it must be so with her always. The circumstances of her life would ever be sad. What right had she to expect any other fate after such a catas-

trophe as that which her brother had brought upon the family? It was clear to her that she had done wrong in supposing that she could marry and live with a prosperous man of the world like Captain Aylmer. Their natures were different, and no such union could lead to any good. So she told herself, with much misery of spirit, as she was preparing the breakfast-table for William Belton.

But William Belton did not come to eat the breakfast. He got what he wanted in that way at the inn at Redicote, and even then hesitated, loitering at the bar, before he would go over. What was he to say, and how would he be received? After all, had he not done amiss in coming to a house at which he probably might not be wanted? Would it not be thought that his journey had been made solely with a view to his own property? He would be regarded as the heir pouncing upon the inheritance before as yet the old owner was under the ground. At any rate it would be too early for him to make his visit yet awhile; and, to kill time, he went over to a carpenter

who had been employed by him about the place at Belton. The carpenter spoke to him as though everything were his own, and was very intent upon future improvements. This made Will more disgusted with himself than ever, and before he could get out of the carpenter's yard he thoroughly wished himself back at Plaistow. But having come so far, he could hardly return without seeing his cousin, and at last he had himself driven over, reaching the house between eleven and twelve o'clock in the day.

Clara met him in the hall, and at once led him into the room which she had prepared for him. He had given her his hand in the hall, but did not speak to her till she had spoken to him after the closing of the room door behind them. "I thought that you would come," she said, still holding him by the hand.

"I did not know what to do," he answered. "I couldn't say which was best. Now I am here I shall only be in your way." He did not dare to press her hand, nor could he bring himself to take his away from her.

“In my way;—yes; as an angel, to tell me what to do in my trouble. I knew you would come, because you are so good. But you will have breakfast;—see, I have got it ready for you.”

“Oh no; I breakfasted at Redicote. I would not trouble you.”

“Trouble me, Will! Oh, Will, if you knew!” Then there came tears in her eyes, and at the sight of them both his own were filled. How was he to stand it? To take her to his bosom and hold her there for always; to wipe away her tears so that she should weep no more; to devote himself and all his energy and all that was his to comfort her,—this he could have done; but he knew not how to do anything short of this. Every word that she spoke to him was an encouragement to this, and yet he knew that it could not be so. To say a word of his love, or even to look it, would now be an unmanly insult. And yet, how was he not to look it,—not to speak of it? “It is such a comfort that you should be here with me,” she said.

“Then I am glad I am here, though I do not know what I can do. Did he suffer much, Clara?”

“No, I think not; very little. He sank at last quicker than I expected, but just as I thought he would go. He used to speak of you so often, and always with regard and esteem!”

“Dear old man!”

“Yes, Will; he was, in spite of his little faults. No father ever loved his daughter better than he loved me.”

After a while the servant brought in the tea, explaining to Belton that Miss Clara had neither eaten nor drank that morning. “She wouldn’t take anything till you came, sir.” Then Will added his entreaties, and Clara was persuaded, and by degrees there grew between them more ease of manner and capability for talking than had been within their reach when they first met. And during the morning many things were explained, as to which Clara would a few hours previously have thought it to be almost impossible that she should speak to her cousin. She had told him of her aunt’s

money, and the way in which she had on that very morning sent back the cheque to the lawyer; and she had said something also as to Lady Aylmer's views, and her own views as to Lady Aylmer. With Will this subject was one most difficult of discussion; and he blushed and fidgeted in his chair, and walked about the room, and found himself unable to look Clara in the face as she spoke to him. But she went on, goading him with the name, which of all names was the most distasteful to him; and mentioning that name almost in terms of reproach,—of reproach which he felt it would be ungenerous to reciprocate, but which he would have exaggerated to unmeasured abuse if he had given his tongue license to speak his mind.

“I was right to send back the money;—wasn't I, Will? Say that I was right. Pray tell me that you think so!”

“I don't understand it at present, you see; I am no lawyer.”

“But it doesn't want a lawyer to know that I couldn't take the money from him. I am sure you feel that.”

“If a man owes money of course he ought to pay it.”

“But he doesn't owe it, Will. It is intended for generosity.”

“You don't want anybody's generosity, certainly.” Then he reflected that Clara must, after all, depend entirely on the generosity of some one till she was married; and he wanted to explain to her that everything he had in the world was at her service,—was indeed her own. Or he would have explained, if he knew how, that he did not intend to take advantage of the entail,—that the Belton estate should belong to her as the natural heir of her father. But he conceived that the moment for explaining this had hardly as yet arrived, and that he had better confine himself to some attempt at teaching her that no extraneous assistance would be necessary to her, “In money matters,” said he, “of course you are to look to me. That is a matter of course. I'll see Green about the other affairs. Green and I are friends. We'll settle it.”

“That's not what I meant, Will.”

“But it’s what I mean. This is one of those things in which a man has to act on his own judgment. Your father and I understood each other.”

“He did not understand that I was to accept your bounty.”

“Bounty is a nasty word, and I hate it. You accepted me,—as your brother, and as such I mean to act.” The word almost stuck in his throat, but he brought it out at last in a fierce tone, of which she understood accurately the cause and meaning. “All money matters about the place must be settled by me. Indeed, that’s why I came down.”

“Not only for that, Will?”

“Just to be useful in that way, I mean.”

“You came to see me,—because you knew I should want you.” Surely this was malice prepense! Knowing what was his want, how could she exasperate it by talking thus of her own? “As for money, I have no claim on any one. No creature was ever more forlorn. But I will not talk of that.”

“Did you not say that you would treat me as a brother?”

“I did not mean that I was to be a burden on you.”

“I know what I meant, and that is sufficient.”

Belton had been at the house some hours before he made any sign of leaving her, and when he did so he had to explain something of his plans. He would remain, he said, for about a week in the neighbourhood. She of course was obliged to ask him to stay at the house,—at the house which was in fact his own; but he declined to do this, blurring out his reason at last very plainly. “Captain Aylmer would not like it, and I suppose you are bound to think of what he likes and dislikes.” “I don’t know what right Captain Aylmer would have to dislike any such thing,” said Clara. But, nevertheless, she allowed the reason to pass as current, and did not press her invitation. Will declared that he would stay at the inn at Redicote, striving to explain in some very unintelligible manner that such

an arrangement would be very convenient. He would remain at Redicote, and would come over to Belton every day during his sojourn in the country. Then he asked one question in a low whisper as to the last sad ceremony, and, having received an answer, started off with the declared intention of calling on Colonel Askerton.

The next two or three days passed uncomfortably enough with Will Belton. He made his head-quarters at the little inn of Redicote, and drove himself backwards and forwards between that place and the estate which was now his own. On each of these days he saw Colonel Askerton, whom he found to be a civil pleasant man, willing enough to rid himself of the unpleasant task he had undertaken, but at the same time, willing also to continue his services if any further services were required of him. But of Mrs. Askerton on these occasions Will saw nothing, nor had he ever spoken to her since the time of his first visit to the Castle. Then came the day of the funeral, and after that rite was over he returned

with his cousin to the house. There was no will to be read. The old squire had left no will, nor was there anything belonging to him at the time of his death that he could bequeath. The furniture in the house, the worn-out carpets and old-fashioned chairs, belonged to Clara; but, beyond that, property had she none, nor had it been in her father's power to endow her with anything. She was alone in the world, penniless, with a conviction on her own mind that her engagement with Frederic Aylmer must of necessity come to an end, and with a feeling about her cousin which she could hardly analyse, but which told her that she could not go to his house in Norfolk, nor live with him at Belton Castle, nor trust herself in his hands as she would into those of a real brother.

On the afternoon of the day on which her father had been buried she brought to him a letter, asking him to read it, and tell her what she should do. The letter was from Lady Aylmer, and contained an invitation to Aylmer Castle. It had been accompanied, as the reader

may possibly remember, by a letter from Captain Aylmer himself. Of this she of course informed her cousin ; but she did not find it to be necessary to show the letter of one rival to the other. Lady Aylmer's letter was cold in its expression of welcome, but very dictatorial in pointing out the absolute necessity that Clara should accept the invitation so given. "I think you will not fail to agree with me, dear Miss Amedroz," the letter said, "that under these strange and perplexing circumstances, this is the only roof which can, with any propriety, afford you a shelter." "And why not the poor-house?" she said, aloud to her cousin, when she perceived that his eye had descended so far on the page. He shook his head angrily, but said nothing ; and when he had finished the letter he folded it and gave it back still in silence. "And what am I to do?" she said. "You tell me that I am to come to you for advice in everything."

"You must decide for yourself here."

"And you won't advise me. You won't tell me whether she is right?"

“I suppose she is right.”

“Then I had better go?”

“If you mean to marry Captain Aylmer, you had better go.”

“I am engaged to him.”

“Then you had better go.”

“But I will not submit myself to her tyranny.”

“Let the marriage take place at once, and you will have to submit only to his. I suppose you are prepared for that?”

“I do not know. I do not like tyranny.”

Again he stood silent for awhile, looking at her, and then he answered: “I should not tyrannise over you, Clara.”

“Oh, Will, Will, do not speak like that. Do not destroy everything.”

“What am I to say?”

“What would you say if your sister, your real sister, asked advice in such a strait? If you had a sister, who came to you, and told you all her difficulty, you would advise her. You would not say words to make things worse for her.”

“It would be very different.”

“But you said you would be my brother.”

“How am I to know what you feel for this man? It seems to me that you half hate him, half fear him, and sometimes despise him.”

“Hate him!—No, I never hate him.”

“Go to him, then, and ask him what you had better do. Don't ask me.” Then he hurried out of the room, slamming the door behind him. But before he had half gone down the stairs he remembered the ceremony at which he had just been present, and how desolate she was in the world, and he returned to her. “I beg your pardon, Clara,” he said, “I am passionate; but I must be a beast to show my passion to you on such a day as this. If I were you I should accept Lady Aylmer's invitation,—merely thanking her for it in the ordinary way. I should then go and see how the land lay. That is the advice I should give my sister.”

“And I will,—if it is only because you tell me.”

“But as for a home,—tell her you have one

of your own,—at Belton Castle, from which no one can turn you out, and where no one can intrude on you. This house belongs to you.” Then, before she could answer him, he had left the room; and she listened to his heavy quick footsteps as he went across the hall and out of the front door.

He walked across the park and entered the little gate of Colonel Askerton’s garden, as though it were his habit to go to the cottage when he was at Belton. There had been various matters on which the two men had been brought into contact concerning the old squire’s death and the tenancy of the cottage, so that they had become almost intimate. Belton had nothing new that he specially desired to say to Colonel Askerton, whom, indeed, he had seen only a short time before at the funeral; but he wanted the relief of speaking to some one before he returned to the solitude of the inn at Redicote. On this occasion, however, the Colonel was out, and the maid asked him if he would see Mrs. Askerton. When he said something about not

troubling her, the girl told him that her mistress wished to speak to him, and then he had no alternative but to allow himself to be shown into the drawing room.

“I want to see you a minute,” said Mrs. Askerton, bowing to him without putting out her hand, “that I might ask you how you find your cousin.”

“She is pretty well, I think.”

“Colonel Askerton has seen more of her than I have since her father’s death, and he says that she does not bear it well. He thinks that she is ill.”

“I do not think her ill. Of course she is not in good spirits.”

“No; exactly. How should she be? But he thinks she seems so worn. I hope you will excuse me, Mr. Belton, but I love her so well that I cannot bear to be quite in the dark as to her future. Is anything settled yet?”

“She is going to Aylmer Castle.”

“To Aylmer Castle! Is she indeed? At once?”

“Very soon. Lady Aylmer has asked her.”

“Lady Aylmer! Then I suppose——”

“You suppose what?” Will Belton asked.

“I did not think she would have gone to Aylmer Castle,—though I dare say it is the best thing she could do. She seemed to me to dislike the Aylmers,—that is, Lady Aylmer,—so much! But I suppose she is right?”

“She is right to go if she likes it.”

“She is circumstanced so cruelly! Is she not? Where else could she go? I do so feel for her. I believe I need hardly tell you, Mr. Belton, that she would be as welcome here as flowers in May,—but that I do not dare to ask her to come to us.” She said this in a low voice, turning her eyes away from him, looking first upon the ground, and then again up at the window,—but still not daring to meet his eye.

“I don’t exactly know about that,” said Belton awkwardly.

“You know, I hope, that I love her dearly.”

“Everybody does that,” said Will.

“You do, Mr. Belton.”

“Yes;—I do; just as though she were—— my sister.”

“And as your sister would you let her come here,—to us?” He sat silent for awhile, thinking, and she waited patiently for his answer. But she spoke again before he answered her. “I am well aware that you know all my history, Mr. Belton.”

“I shouldn’t tell it her, if you mean that, though she were my sister. If she were my wife I should tell her.”

“And why your wife?”

“Because then I should be sure it would do no harm.”

“Then I find that you can be generous, Mr. Belton. But she knows it all as well as you do.”

“I did not tell her.”

“Nor did I;—but I should have done so had not Captain Aylmer been before me. And now tell me whether I could ask her to come here.”

“It would be useless, as she is going to Aylmer Castle.”

“But she is going there simply to find a home,—having no other.”

“That is not so, Mrs. Askerton. She has a home as perfectly her own as any woman in the land. Belton Castle is hers, to do what she may please with it. She can live here if she likes it, and nobody can say a word to her. She need not go to Aylmer Castle to look for a home.”

“You mean you would lend her the house?”

“It is hers.”

“I do not understand you, Mr. Belton.”

“It does not signify;—we will say no more about it.”

“And you think she likes going to Lady Aylmer’s?”

“How should I say what she likes?”

Then there was another pause before Mrs. Askerton spoke again. “I can tell you one thing,” she said: “she does not like him.”

“That is her affair.”

“But she should be taught to know her own mind before she throws herself away altogether. You would not wish your cousin to marry a man whom she does not love because at one time she had come to think

that she loved him. That is the truth of it, Mr. Belton. If she goes to Aylmer Castle she will marry him,—and she will be an unhappy woman always afterwards. If you would sanction her coming here for a few days, I think all that would be cured. She would come in a moment, if you advised her.”

Then he went away, allowing himself to make no further answer at the moment, and discussed the matter with himself as he walked back to Redicote, meditating on it with all his mind, and all his heart, and all his strength. And, as he meditated, it came on to rain bitterly,—a cold piercing February rain,—and the darkness of night came upon him, and he floundered on through the thick mud of the Somersetshire lanes, unconscious of the weather and of the darkness. There was a way open to him by which he might even yet get what he wanted. He thought he saw that there was a way open to him through the policy of this woman, whom he perceived to have become friendly to him. He saw, or

thought that he saw, it all. No day had absolutely been fixed for this journey to Yorkshire; and if Clara were induced to go first to the cottage, and stay there with Mrs. Askerton, no such journey might ever be taken. He could well understand that such a visit on her part would give a mortal offence to all the Aylmers. That tyranny of which Clara spoke with so much dread would be exhibited then without reserve, and so there would be an end altogether of the Aylmer alliance. But were she once to start for Aylmer Park, then there would be no hope for him. Then her fate would be decided,—and his. As far as he could see, too,—as far as he could see then, there would be no dishonesty in this plan. Why should Clara not go to Mrs. Askerton's house? What could be more natural than such a visit at such a time? If she were in truth his sister he would not interfere to prevent it if she wished it. He had told himself that the woman should be forgiven her offence, and had thought that that forgiveness should be complete. If the Aylmers were so

unreasonable as to quarrel with her on this ground, let them quarrel with her. Mrs. Askerton had told him that Clara did not really like Captain Aylmer. Perhaps it was so; and if so, what greater kindness could he do her than give her an opportunity for escaping such a union?

The whole of the next day he remained at Redicote, thinking, doubting, striving to reconcile his wishes and his honesty. It rained all day, and as he sat alone, smoking in the comfortless inn, he told himself that the rain was keeping him;—but in truth it was not the rain. Had he resolved to do his best to prevent this visit to Yorkshire, or had he resolved to further it, I think he would have gone to Belton without much fear of the rain. On the second day after the funeral he did go, and he had then made up his mind. Clara, if she would listen to him, should show her independence of Lady Aylmer by staying a few days with the Askertons before she went to Yorkshire, and by telling Lady Aylmer that such was her intention. “If she really loves

the man," he said to himself, "she will go at once, in spite of anything that I can say. If she does not, I shall be saving her."

"How cruel of you not to come yesterday!" Clara said, as soon as she saw him.

"It rained hard," he answered.

"But men like you care so little for rain; but that is when you have business to take you out,—or pleasure."

"You need not be so severe. The truth is I had things to trouble me."

"What troubled you, Will? I thought all the trouble was mine."

"I suppose everybody thinks that his own shoe pinches the hardest."

"Your shoe can't pinch you very bad, I should think. Sometimes when I think of you it seems that you are an embodiment of prosperity and happiness."

"I don't see it myself;—that's all. Did you write to Lady Aylmer, Clara?"

"I wrote; but I didn't send it. I would not send any letter till I had shown it to you, as you are my confessor and adviser. There;

read it. Nothing, I think, could be more courteous or less humble." He took the letter and read it. Clara had simply expressed herself willing to accept Lady Aylmer's invitation, and asked her ladyship to fix a day. There was no mention of Captain Aylmer's name in the note.

"And you think this is best?" he said. His voice was hardly like his own as he spoke. There was wanting to it that tone of self-assurance which his voice almost always possessed, even when self-assurance was lacking to his words.

"I thought it was your own advice," she said.

"Well;—yes; that is, I don't quite know. You couldn't go for a week or so yet, I suppose."

"Perhaps in about a week."

"And what will you do till then?"

"What will I do!"

"Yes;—where do you mean to stay?"

"I thought, Will, that perhaps you would let me—remain here."

"Let you!—Oh, heavens! Look here, Clara."

"What is it, Will?"

"Before heaven I want to do for you what

may be the best for you,—without thinking of myself; without thinking of myself, if I could only help it.”

“ I have never doubted you. I never will doubt you. I believe in you next to my God. I do, Will; I do.” He walked up and down the room half-a-dozen times before he spoke again, while she stood by the table watching him. “ I wish,” she said, “ I knew what it is that troubles you.” To this he made no answer, but went on walking till she came up to him, and putting both her hands upon his arm said, “ It will be better, Will, that I should go;—will it not? Speak to me, and say so. I feel that it will be better.” Then he stopped in his walk and looked down upon her, as her hands still rested upon his shoulder. He gazed upon her for some few seconds, remaining quite motionless, and then, opening his arms, he surrounded her with his embrace, and pressing her with all his strength close to his bosom, kissed her forehead, and her cheeks, and her lips, and her eyes. His will was so masterful, his strength so great, and his motion so quick, that she was powerless to

escape from him till he relaxed his hold. Indeed she hardly struggled, so much was she surprised and so soon released. But the moment that he left her he saw that her face was burning red, and that the tears were streaming from her eyes. She stood for a moment trembling, with her hands clenched, and with a look of scorn upon her lips and brow that he had never seen before ; and then she threw herself on a sofa, and, burying her face, sobbed aloud, while her whole body was shaken as with convulsions. He leaned over her repentant, not knowing what to do, not knowing how to speak. All ideas of his scheme had gone from him now. He had offended her for ever, — past redemption. What could be the use now of any scheme? And as he stood there he hated himself because of his scheme. The utter misery and disgrace of the present moment had come upon him because he had thought more of himself than of her. It was but a few moments since she had told him that she trusted him next to her God ; and yet, in those few moments, he had shown himself utterly unworthy of that

trust, and had destroyed all her confidence. But he could not leave her without speaking to her. "Clara!" he said;—"Clara." But she did not answer him. "Clara; will you not speak to me? Will you not let me ask you to forgive me?" But still she only sobbed. For her, at that moment, we may say that sobbing was easier than speech. How was she to pardon so great an offence? How was she to resent such passionate love?

But he could not continue to stand there motionless, all but speechless, while she lay with her face turned away from him. He must at any rate in some manner take himself away out of the room; and this he could not do, even in his present condition of unlimited disgrace, without a word of farewell. "Perhaps I had better go and leave you," he said.

Then at last there came a voice, "Oh, Will, why have you done this? Why have you treated me so badly?" When he had last seen her face her mouth had been full of scorn, but there was no scorn now in her voice. "Why—why—why?"

Why indeed;—except that it was needful

for him that she should know the depth of his passion. "If you will forgive me, Clara, I will not offend you so again," he said.

"You have offended me. What am I to say? What am I to do? I have no other friend."

"I am a wretch. I know that I am a wretch."

"I did not suspect that you would be so cruel. Oh, Will!"

But before he went she told him that she had forgiven him, and she had preached to him a solemn, sweet sermon on the wickedness of yielding to momentary impulses. Her low, grave words sank into his ears as though they were divine; and when she said a word to him, blushing as she spoke, of the sin of his passion, and of what her sin would be if she were to permit it, he sat by her weeping like an infant, tears which were certainly tears of innocence. She had been very angry with him; but I think she loved him better when her sermon was finished, than she had ever loved him before.

There was no further question as to her going to Aylmer Castle, nor was any mention made of Mrs. Askerton's invitation to the

cottage. The letter for Lady Aylmer was sent, and it was agreed between them that Will should remain at Redicote till the answer from Yorkshire should come, and should then convey Clara as far as London on her journey. And when he took leave of her that afternoon, she was able to give him her hand in her old hearty, loving way, and to call him Will with the old hearty, loving tone. And he,—he was able to accept these tokens of her graciousness, as though they were signs of a pardon which she had been good to give, but which he certainly had not deserved.

As he went back to Redicote, he swore to himself that he would never love any woman but her,—even though she must be the wife of Captain Aylmer.

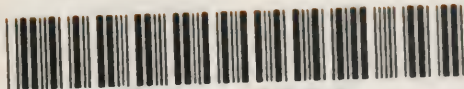
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